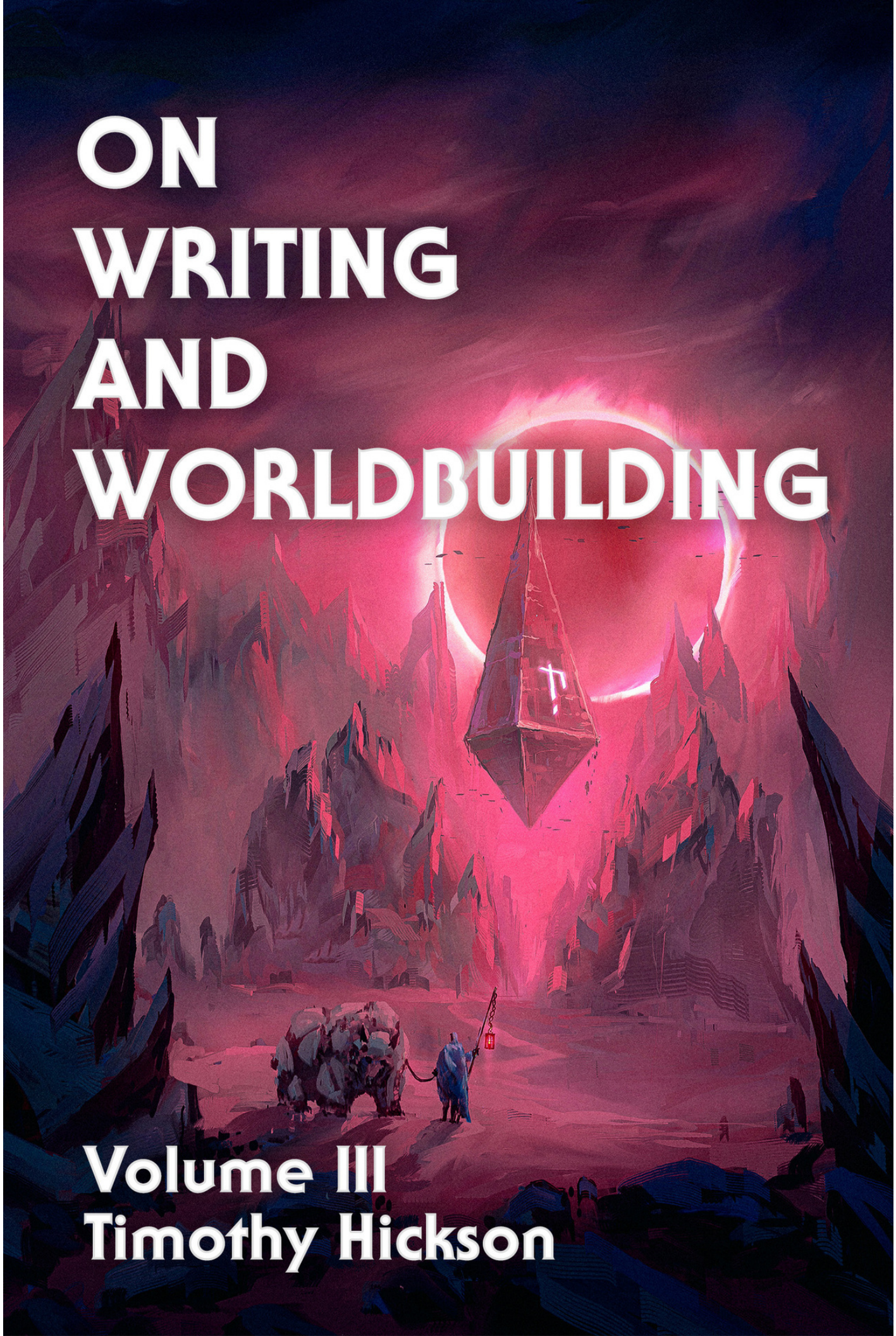
ON WRITING AND WORLDBUILDING



Volume III

Timothy Hickson

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ON WRITING

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

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The Great Gatsby by F Scott Fitzgerald
To the Lighthouse by Virgina Woolfe
A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens
Hogfather by Terry Pratchett
A Game of Thrones by George RR Martin
'What You Left in the Ditch' by Aimee Bender
Cut by Patricia McCormick
It's Kind of a Funny Story by Ned Vizinni
I Will Never Tell You This by Shaelin Bishop
The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins
The Testaments by Margaret Atwood
'Winnow' by Hannah Lee Kidder
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The Rest of Us Just Live Here by Patrick Ness
The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo by Steig Larsson
Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone by JK Rowling
The Librarian of Auschwitz by Antonio Iturbe
Children of Time by Adrian Tchaikovsky

Character descriptions are hard to write. They need to be vivid, memorable, distinct, and creative all at once—not just a list of hair and eye colours. I studied thirty-eight character descriptions by brilliant authors across a variety of genres, and in this chapter, we'll go over why they work and what we can learn from them.

Vivid physical descriptions

Vivid character descriptions are not just lists of random physical features. Not only do physical attributes like height, eye colour, or shoulder shape not really matter that much by themselves, but readers find it difficult to remember a lot of them unless they're given a reason to. Often, authors

heave a slew of nouns and adjectives at the reader with little effect. This is why in *Save the Cat,* Blake Snyder advocates highlighting memorable or distinguishing features that set a character apart from others, like a 'limp or an eyepatch'. William Gibson employs this in describing Chrome in *Burning Chrome*.

> Chrome, her pretty childlike face smooth as steel, with eyes that would have been at home on the bottom of some deep Atlantic trench, cold grey eyes that lived under terrible pressure. They said she cooked her own cancers for people who crossed her…

The focus here is on Chrome's distinct, dark eyes. They hint at her darker nature, and not only does a vivid image form around this distinguishing feature, but Gibson goes a lot further.

Unlike in film, writers cannot get the reader to *perfectly* envision our characters the way we do. Sometimes, not even the author has a constant, concrete vision of them. Spending endless words trying to paint a complete picture just isn't worth it. Even if we spent whole pages detailing every inch of their bodies, how they moved, how they dressed, and how they spoke, there will always be a gap between our words on the page and the projection in the reader's mind. Insisting a reader imagines a character the way you do can even actively undermine the audience's ability to engage with the story by interpreting things their own way—one of the strengths of the textual medium. Instead, Gibson focuses only on Chrome's eyes and contrasts other characters with that feature two other times with wildly different descriptions.

> With just those few freckles across the bridge of her nose, and eyes somewhere between dark amber and French coffee.

> I went out and looked for Rikki, found her in a café with Sendai eyes, half-healed suture fines radiating from his bruised sockets.

Gibson distinguishes his characters in our mind by focusing on their eyes. It's also worth noting that Chrome's eyes aren't actually *that* abnormal. A distinctive feature can be freckles from childhood which

haven’t melted away, auburn hair glittering in the sunset, or skin which becomes a patchwork of pink and cream in the summer sun. These are normal things which otherwise mark them out. No other characters have eyes as dark and deep as Chrome’s. It’s not just which features you communicate to the reader, but which features you return to and repeat that leave an impression.

We should also take note of the strength of the adjectives, metaphors, and similes in Chrome’s description. Chrome doesn’t just have ‘dark grey eyes’ but ‘cold grey eyes that lived under terrible pressure’. The first line describes them factually, while the second alludes to Chrome being calculating, conniving, and ruthless, which she is. It also alludes to her having lived in a world full of constant, unbearable pressure.

In this way, Gibson doesn’t just describe his characters’ physical features, but leaves an impression of who they are with his framing, and that’s more important. It’s the impression readers remember more, those connotations you leave them with. Consider the words you use and ask if you’re just stating facts about your character’s appearance or showing the reader who they are.

Posture, movement, and facial expressions

The truth is, many of the best physical descriptions I came across had little to do with clothing or eyes or the like and everything to do with posture, movement, and facial expressions. F Scott Fitzgerald describes Gatsby almost entirely through a single feature in his introduction: his smile.

> He smiled understandingly—much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced–or seemed to face–the whole eternal world for an instant, and then concentrated on you with an irresistible prejudice in your favour.

It's the first, and undoubtedly most memorable, exposure we get to his physical presence, and it tells us so much more than saying, 'He wore extravagant clothing and his hair was like a quiet winter night under a full moon—glimmering like a halo'. The smile's description tells us he's not just charming, but mesmerising, even all-encompassing, with a kind of wisdom we readers are not privy to.

It's tempting to focus on more grounded physical features, but sometimes posture, movement, and expression do a better job of communicating the essence of a character, and they *are* a part of their physical appearance. These mannerisms can dictate the presence a character has in a scene and contrast them with other characters, not unlike Chrome's eyes.

Readers build a mental image around the impressions and connotations they're given. Unlocking their imagination with evocative mannerisms often results in a more vivid image of a character than describing what they look like. What kind of clothes would a rich man with this smile wear?

In *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolfe describes Charles Tansley almost entirely through their posture and movement.

> He couldn't play cricket; he poked; he shuffled… forever walking up and down, up and down, with Mr Ramsey.

Charles Dickens conjures an image of Scrooge with a string of mostly adjectives.

> [He was] a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner!

This is almost entirely movement, but it delivers a physicality other descriptions would not. Readers might not remember what colour coat or hat your character is wearing but giving them a commanding air in a scene with distinct body language can leave a lasting impression of their physical presence.

The best descriptions tell us who the character is

Descriptions of characters might include some mix of their eyes, movement, body shape, smile, scars, posture, or whatever you'd like to focus on. We leave out some features and emphasise others. None of the descriptions I studied had everything, especially not on the first impression. These authors recognised the importance of identifying which features best conveyed their characters. It was Chrome's eyes and face shape in *Burning Chrome,* Gatsby's smile in *The Great Gatsby,* and Tansley's posture in *To the Lighthouse.* Focusing purely on the looks of a character is a relatively surface-level way of getting to know them, but what you choose to show and how you describe it can lead the reader to deeper understandings of their psychological state, flaws, worldview, and personality. Let's explore how Terry Pratchett captures Mr Teatime in *Hogfather*.

> Some unexplained accident had taken the other [eye], and the missing orb had been replaced by a ball of glass. The result was disconcerting. But what bothered Lord Downey far more was the man's other eye, the one that might loosely be called normal. He'd never seen such a small and sharp pupil. Teatime looked at the world through a pinhole.

Not only does Pratchett focus on describing a single distinctive physical characteristic—Mr Teatime's eyes—but the way he describes it leans into how the character hyperfocuses. He becomes obsessed to a fault, and as a result, has a narrow, inflexible view of the world. In other words, he 'looked at the world through a pinhole.'

In George RR Martin's *A Game of Thrones,* Martin doesn't describe the inscription on King Robert's armour or the colour of his eyes, but instead focuses on how he smells, how fat he is, and his unkempt beard. Each of these highlights the king's flaws: he has become lazy and more concerned with pleasure than ruling the kingdom. This is the type of conscious decision every author makes—not just who the character is on the inside, but how they communicate this to the reader.

Sometimes, you might want to hide certain revelations about a character or emphasise their thematic role. Gatsby's smile hints at parts of his character, but it also perfectly encapsulates his role in the story thematically: he is a mesmerising façade you can't help but get caught up in, rare and special, making you believe in the American Dream and its promises, but it's hollow. The description brings us into Nick Carroway's flawed perspective of the man. Nick is an unreliable narrator. This smile, like all of Gatsby, is a façade you fool yourself into believing. King Robert's boastful laziness and excessive drinking are ultimately what get him killed, making his description a form of foreshadowing by signalling that these features will be important to the plot.

Which things you choose to describe and how you describe them can communicate so much to the reader. Don't just look for distinctive visual features, but features which arise from their quirks, flaws, strengths, beliefs, story role, and struggles. A wedding ring isn't distinctive by itself, unless the woman's husband has already been dead for thirty years and she can't let him go.

Character biases

So many of the great character descriptions I examined were made far more potent by leaning into character biases. Things the perspective character wants, hates, or believes will shape how they see the world, what they focus on in others, and how it's described. Take for example this passage from Aimee Bender's 'What You Left in the Ditch'—a short story about a wife whose husband loses his lips in an explosion while on duty; he's unable to kiss her, and she starts resenting him for it.

> The young man there had always had lips but now they seemed twice as large and full and incredible, as if his face was overflowing with lip. While he ran her milk and eggs and toothpaste over the electronic sensor, she couldn't stop looking at them, guessing what they tasted like. The warm, salty taste of flesh.

How she describes this other man tells us almost nothing about him and everything about her flaws and desires. Her perspective creates a bias to focus on the man's lips, or even to exaggerate and hyperbolise them. It's dehumanising, as she doesn't even name him or consider his personality; instead, it's carnal and primal, reducing him to what he could give her, that raw desire for the 'taste of flesh' in a kiss. We like to focus on a character's thoughts, *their* feelings, *their* features, but so much of characterisation is about how they interact with things external to them.

In Patricia McCormick's *Cut,* Callie describes a series of girls at a mental health hospital, which also tells us more about her psychological state than what she's observing.

> Our problems are called issues… The rest, like me, are assorted psychos. We're called guests with behavioural issues… And the place is called a residential treatment facility. It is not a loony bin… Tara, a skinny girl who has to wear a baseball cap to cover a bald spot where her hair fell out, and Becca, another really skinny girl who wears little-girl tights that pool around her ankles.

Callie defines those around her by physical traits arising from their mental illnesses in the same way she defines herself by her self-harm. Throughout the book, there's an emphasis on labels and escaping them, how dehumanising they can be, and how we incorporate these things into our sense of identity. A big part of Callie's arc is coming to see herself as more than her self-harm, and these character descriptions help set that up.

In both *Cut* and *What You Left in the Ditch,* descriptions of others are used to characterise the narrator. Consider what biases, concerns, jealousies, and experiences of your characters would affect which features they focus on in others or themselves and how they frame them. This technique works especially well in first-person because we're already limited to a character's perspective, but it works equally well in third-limited, as is the case with *What You Left in the Ditch.* Third-person omniscient narration can use this, but it's a bit harder and can sometimes mislead the reader unless they know whose perspective it's meant to feed into. It's also worth noting this applies to descriptions of the world around them. Whether a character describes the rain as 'unrelenting' or 'cleansing' tells us a lot about how they view the world.

Everyone knows the laughable young-adult trait of a character randomly looking in a mirror and describing themselves in excessive detail.

> I wouldn't normally look at myself in the mirror, but that day, which happens to be the first chapter of this book, I did. I was very normal. My hair was exactly the colour I remembered it was. But also, I was incredibly beautiful, but not in a way I know it. My name is Wildermitch Trissmelt.

We tend to laugh at this sort of thing because it's very clearly written for the audience rather than because a character would normally do it. However, character descriptions are difficult in a first-person narrative. Even though we're often mindful of how we look, we tend to think about our hair being messy rather than whether it's blonde or not. Ned Vizinni's *It's Kind of a Funny Story* is a great example of how to tackle this problem.

> I look so normal. I look like I've always looked, like I did before the fall of last year. Dark hair and dark eyes and one snaggled tooth. Big eyebrows that meet in the middle. A long nose, sort of twisted. Pupils that are naturally large… which blend into the dark brown to make two big saucer eyes, holes in me… This is Craig. And I always look like I'm about to cry.

This description is almost laughably close to the joke description I gave before, but the context vindicates it. *It's Kind of a Funny Story* is about a boy with growing urges to end his life, having become number and more dissociated as time has gone on. This description is given just as those thoughts are escalating, and the language evokes Craig's emotional state. In the first half, there's this sense of being stuck, immobile, and unable to escape or move forward, but the second half is more key. Vizinni leans heavily into Craig's biases. Craig is berating himself for his looks, describing his features negatively because of his self-loathing and warped self-perception. The comparison to how he looked a whole year ago is self-deprecating. He focuses on how he hasn't changed, hasn't gotten better, and has stayed in the same place physically and psychologically, spiralling into himself. I love the phrase, 'holes in me'. It captures this hollowness he

feels, looking at his reflection and seeing something not fully there, not fully human.

Shaelin Bishop leans into these sorts of biases in a different way by having their character compare themselves to a girl they *wish* was their daughter in *I Will Never Tell You This*.

> Black braids, blue raincoat, gum boots, ten years old; your daughter moved like an otter, with curious zeal. But she had my hair, glossy like oil. Dark eyes like mine. Skin beige like mine. A young face still easily attributed to me. To everyone but you, we could have been father and daughter.

In both this and *It's Kind of a Funny Story,* the first-person narrator has strong personal reasons for pointing out a detailed physical description. If you don't have that though, a lot of authors will just throw in a few physical details here and there, and some don't even bother describing their characters physically at all for a while. In *The Hunger Games*, Suzanne Collins only gives Katniss one feature—her braid—in her introduction. You don't need a complex reason to describe something, but it is worth recognising when a character would *not* give a slew of details about themselves.

One way to give your characters a reason to describe themselves is if something has changed, especially something abnormal or unexpected. This can easily arise from the plot, which also gives the description more relevance to the story. Suzanne Collins only describes Katniss' braid because she doesn't usually have one. The braid is only there because of the ceremony for the Hunger Games. Katniss changes her hair to appear more formal, like putting on your Sunday best or attending a funeral, but in that moment, we get to describe how her hair would *normally* be. Perhaps your character is desperately doing their makeup in the car mirror on the way to work, but it's looking off, or they're pushed into a puddle by their bully and catch their battered reflection in the water.

Descriptions can tell us about the story around them

Character descriptions can inform readers about their relationships, your worldbuilding, and even a story's theme. I was astounded with Margaret Atwood's finesse in opening *The Testaments* with a character description.

> Only the dead are allowed to have statues, but I have been given one while still alive. Already I am petrified. This statue was a small token of appreciation for my many contributions, said the citation… We don't do cheering here in Ardua Hall, but there was discreet clapping. I inclined my head in a nod. My statue is larger than life, as statues tend to be, and shows me as younger, slimmer, and in better shape than I've been for some time. I am standing straight, shoulders back, my lips curved into a firm but benevolent smile. My eyes are fixed on some cosmic point of reference understood to represent my idealism, my unflinching commitment to duty, my determination to move forward despite all obstacles…

Atwood draws a contrast between how Aunt Lydia looks and how she is portrayed and connects how these differences intersect with the principles of Gilead—a post-American fascist society. In other words, she's setting the scene, atmosphere, and worldbuilding of this dim, dystopian reality. This is a restrictive world of unflinching duty and order before kindness. Even more importantly, the contrast between her and her statue also introduces a core element of the novel: the difference between how she is perceived and how she truly thinks. Gilead is built on propaganda, lies propped up by framing and ideology. The statue, as part of this agenda, is far different to reality. It's a projection.

Besides establishing the backstory of a setting, descriptions can communicate the backstory of your characters. In her short story, 'Winnow', Hannah Lee Kidder uses description to show how two girls have changed following their breakup.

> [her hair has] grown a lot, almost to her hips. There's the half-moon scar. She's paler than she was last I saw her, too — not sickly-looking, just not as sunned. It makes her green eyes stand out. When I'm not tan, you can see the blue veins running beneath my skin and dark circles under my eyes. I look like that now. She looks porcelain. Her eyelashes flutter as she takes in the room, eyes landing on me… She glides over, unrushed and graceful… She must have been in the shop for a while, because her arms feel warm through both of our long sleeves.

The perspective character lingers on details she remembers, like the half-moon scar and her warmth, recalling the physical intimacy they might have once shared. The distinct sense of longing from one side makes the relationship awkward. Kidder juxtaposes their eyes to show one has it together while the other doesn't: 'Her eyelashes flutter as she takes in the room' versus 'dark circles under my eyes'. How she describes her characters doesn't just capture their appearance, but the relationship they once had, what it looks like now, and this odd tension hanging between the two of them—unacknowledged, but definitely there.

A divorced woman describing the pale band on her husband's ring-finger, now obscured by a tattoo, tells us a lot about where their relationship has come to. Relationships leave vestiges of the past, and when we engage with the world, taking it in and describing it, we often do so by making connections to our own experiences. Memories about your characters' past experiences—a scar she gave him or the shoelaces she once tied for her children—can sum up or explain their relationships. Comparison and juxtaposition are fantastic techniques for communicating the dynamics between your characters. In some of the best writing, descriptions blur with introspection and prose.

I also want to give a couple of examples of using description to develop theme or concept. We already discussed this with Gatsby, but TR Napper's *A Strange Loop* and Patrick Ness' *The Rest of Us Just Live Here* provide some fascinating tidbits to learn from.

First, 'A Strange Loop' deals with to what degree a person is 'real' or 'authentic' in a world where you can sell and delete memories.

> ...[he] had a full head of silver that probably wasn't real, and a movie star chin that most definitely wasn't. The gold of the heavy chain around his wrist: that would be real. The doctor looked forty, but he stank of money. Probably closer to sixty… [the doctor gave him] the perfect imitation of a smile, his pristine white teeth matching the room.

There's a terrible irony to describing the doctor this way. The perspective character sees this man as fake, as society often does with plastic surgery, but does not reckon with how he too is becoming less and less real himself by selling his memories. In fact, someone selling their memories is arguably even *less* whole than someone with surface-level changes to their appearance, given our memories are fundamental to who we are. Napper connects his theme and the main character's arc to how he describes others as he slowly realises what he is becoming and how much he has lost across the story. This also intersects with character design. Napper designed this guy to look 'fake', so it's not just how the main character describes him. How you actively decide to design character features affects the shape of your story and how you express your themes.

The Rest of Us Just Live Here is interesting because Patrick Ness barely describes his main character or many of the supports—and that's the point. The book's gimmick is it being about people we would not usually call main characters. There's even a secondary story going on in the background with what they call the 'indie kids', who have weird names and distinct features, unlike the primary characters. Their ordinariness is meant to be so pervasive that it's unworthy of much description at all.

Structural techniques

Structural techniques, ranging from sentence construction to how a scene unfolds, can also make character descriptions more effective. Steig Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* features Lisbeth Salander, one of the most visually striking heroines of the last couple of decades, and her description was so memorable to me in part because Larsson spends several pages giving us a rundown of her record keeping, reporting, and work ethic before he ever describes her physically. This description of a meticulous,

agonisingly determined, no-nonsense character leads you to imagine an uptight, pant-suit-wearing, FBI agent archetype, the sort who would spend an hour in front of the mirror every morning to ensure not a single hair was out of place. Then, Larsson turns the tables on the reader and describes Lisbeth with a dramatic departure from that image.

> ...[a] pale, anorexic young woman who had hair as short as a fuse, and a pierced nose and eyebrows. She had a wasp tattoo about an inch long on her neck… as though she had just emerged from a week-long orgy with a gang of hard rockers… Her movements were quick and spidery.

Why does this work? We can call this the 'whiplash' technique. Exposition is often more memorable when it's revealed to be contrary to what we or characters previously thought. You paint one image with one set of facts and then show them the truth with another. The drastic shift in framing makes whatever is revealed much more vivid. Larsson uses our own biases against us. He lets us build up an image around what we're given as readers before going the other way. Describing characteristics which contrast with a reader's expectations is one way to do this. Think of a gentle man with massive muscles, or librarian drag queen, or an incredibly shy boy who towers over you and whose strength lets him lift a tree. However, you could also describe their room as an utter mess, only to reveal them as someone who keeps their appearance in tip-top shape.

We've already discussed juxtaposition with *Winnow*—placing contrasting features alongside each other to help them both stand out—but it can go further than that. You can juxtapose different characters, different parts of the same character's body, or their body from their personality. Besides this, you can juxtapose a character's appearance with the story's theme or setting. The result is a more memorable description. Consider which of your character's traits you could lean into before revealing a surprising appearance, or vice versa, which elements of their appearance you could use to subvert expectations about their personality.

Another structural technique is to highlight more important characteristics in their own sentences or paragraphs.

> Harry had a thin face, knobbly knees, black hair, and bright green eyes. He wore round glasses held together with a lot

> of Scotch tape because of all the times Dudley had punched him on the nose. The only thing Harry liked about his own appearance was a very thin scar on his forehead that was shaped like a bolt of lightning.

In *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, Rowling establishes Harry's dysfunctional relationship with his adoptive family by devoting a sentence to his glasses and why they had to be taped up. She also signals how important the lightning bolt scar will be by giving it its own sentence, helping the reader form their image of him around these two significant features. She simply lists other elements of his appearance, indicating they're not quite as essential. She does the exact same thing in *The Chamber of Secrets,* as well. It can also help to use stronger words, metaphors, or similes to give these features connotations, foreshadowing, or depth where you might not with other features. This intersects with the 'limp or an eyepatch' we discussed at the beginning, but it can just as easily apply to everyday, normal features you want to capture in interesting ways.

Another structural technique emerges when we examine character introductions in fast-paced scenes. These descriptions tend to rely more on movement, posture, and expression when communicating contextually relevant information to match the pacing of the scene. When things are moving quickly, these help push the action forward where static descriptions might otherwise kill the pacing. This isn't always the case, but you should ask if a physical description is *relevant* to the scene at hand, especially when you're trying to keep the pacing up, and whether you can present information with a bit more momentum. Consider this fast-paced opening to Antonio Iturbe's *The Librarian of Auschwitz*.

> But Hirsch would smile. He was always smiling enigmatically, as if he knew something that no one else did… [his] eyes are locked on him. His nod is barely perceptible… Hirsch emerges from his tiny cubicle, pretending to be pleasantly surprised by the visit of the SS guards. Hirsch remains upright. The more they relax their posture, the more erect he'll be… to demonstrate the strength of the Jews.

Iturbe characterises Hirsch as unshakable and wary through his controlled, proud posture and enigmatic smile while also moving the scene forward. The focus is on the tension with the SS guards. It displays the social dynamic between them and the Jewish prisoners in Auschwitz while simultaneously keeping the pace up: the guards are here and we need to tread very carefully.

How many features do you need to describe?

We need to take a step back for a moment. You might have noticed just how few physical attributes a lot of these authors actually describe. Some only note one or two explicit features. This is not to say you should or should not do this. Moreso, this illustrates that you don't need to feel compelled to paint a perfect picture of your characters every time. On one hand, a few distinguishing features is enough to set a character apart, and you can trust your reader's imagination to fill in the gaps. The more details you include, the more the reader's mind must conform to the description, ironically creating a barrier to immersion into the story itself. There must be a balance here, of course, but it is something to keep in mind when the primary aim is connecting a reader to your characters.

Also, we're not just describing characters for the sake of it. What we're doing is getting to know them, immersing the reader in the world, and developing conflict. Physical description doesn't necessarily factor into that. Hell, *Children of Time* doesn't give any description of our perspective character in the opening chapter. Instead, she's entirely characterised by how she thinks and speaks—and it works. This is because she soon enough becomes an immaterial digital consciousness anyway, and her whole story is about her mental degeneration. The limited physical description in many of these stories is a conscious decision by these authors about what they are including versus what they're not including. Of course, your style is unique and how you do that will depend. What matters is only including descriptions that add substance to the story.

Summary

1. Vivid physical descriptions often highlight one or a few distinguishing physical features, sometimes contrasting them with the same feature in other characters. Vivid descriptions are careful with word choice, and rather than stating facts, they use connotation to capture the essence of the character.
2. Posture, movement, and facial expressions can be even more important to physical description than hair, eyes, or body shape. They are often more useful in fast-paced scenes where characters are introduced.
3. The best physical descriptions tell us about who the characters are. Consider not just your characters' distinct visual features, but how they are interpreted through the lens of those quirks, flaws, strengths, struggles, and beliefs.
4. Likewise, character biases can change how they perceive others or themselves, characterising the narrator through description, especially in first-person and third-limited.
5. Character descriptions can tell us about the story around someone: relationships, worldbuilding, and even theme and foreshadowing. A character's arc may control what they focus on at the start versus the end of a story.
6. Some structural techniques include the whiplash effect, juxtaposition, highlighting special characteristics in their own sentence, and using a character's actions to describe them in fast-paced scenes.

DEATH SCENES

Misery by Stephen King
The Subtle Knife by Philip Pullman
Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Patterson
Looking for Alaska by John Green
Doctor Who
'Two Robots at the End of the World' by Timothy Hickson
Gladiator
The Green Mile by Stephen King
The White Lotus
Avatar: The Last Airbender
Fifty Shades of Grey by EL James
Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows by JK Rowling
A Game of Thrones by George RR Martin
'What Remains of Maya Sankovy' by GD Angier
The Hunchback of Notre-Dame by Victor Hugo

Killing characters is fun, right? People cry and you get to feel like a good writer because you made them feel something. I took a deep dive into nineteen death scenes by brilliant writers across several genres to understand why they work and what specific techniques we can apply to our own work. There will be spoilers for all the stories listed at the beginning of this chapter; you have been warned. We'll cover language use, introducing the death, juxtaposition, melodrama, subtext, how to make a death hurt, and when death isn't the best writing choice.

The language you use matters

The reality is that if we're invested in a character, it'll hurt when they die, no matter how. Only, 'get your readers invested in your characters' isn't all that helpful advice. That's *all* of writing and a little beyond the breadth of a single chapter in this book.[1] Instead, we can focus on the language writers use in a given scene to help bring those emotions home. What you focus on and your word choice will radically shift the tone and feel of the

death. Focusing on visceral bodily descriptors like the snap of breaking bones and specific bodily trauma creates fear and horror in the reader. It's a hallmark of Stephen King's writing, exemplified in a particularly visceral scene from *Misery*.

> And then, as he entered the zone of broken glass, he felt her hand close around his left ankle and squeeze his stump excruciatingly. He screamed… One of his elbows came down on a hook of glass and it jabbed up into his arm. He crawled forward anyway with it sticking out of him like a push-pin… He turned back again and yes, her face had gone black, a dusky rotted-plum black from which her bleeding eyes bulged wildly… The pressure slackened. For a moment he could breathe again. Then Annie collapsed on top of him, a mountain of slack flesh, and he couldn't breathe at all.

King's focus is on these clear, instinctual descriptions of injury and pain to create this claustrophobic feeling of a real, physical, present threat we can all understand, such that we're left with a sigh of relief when it's over. The pain of a pushpin in the elbow, of grinding over a field of broken glass, and of bleeding eyes focuses on some of the most vulnerable parts of our body, obscuring nothing of the suffering, and he brings together pains we can immediately empathise with. On the other hand, look at how Philip Pullman describes Lee Scoresby's death in *The Subtle Knife*:

> Another crack, and this time the bullet went deep somewhere inside, seeking out the center of his life. He thought: It won't find it there. Hester's my center… Lee found it hard to pull the trigger. Everything was hard… Then she was pressing her little proud broken self against his face, as close as she could get, and then they died.

The language here talks about pain and death in the abstract rather than attaching it to visceral bodily descriptors. Pullman uses metaphors and similes to abstract us from the pain of death, focusing instead on its purpose and the love Scoresby and his daemon Hester share. Conversely, King's poetics—'a dusky rotted-plum black' and 'a mountain of slack flesh'—

bring us closer to this painful, uncomfortable experience. The word choice in *The Subtle Knife* evokes sorrow and loss rather than King's physical pain and horror. Think about what you want the reader to feel in a death scene, how abstracted you want them to be from the pain, and how your language feeds into that intent.

How to introduce the death

I read *Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Patterson when I was ten. It left a huge impact on me, being one of the first books I read that dealt with death in a grounded way, especially featuring a child my age. Death had never quite seemed *real* in other books like JRR Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. Instead, it took on this mythic quality and was more likened to falling asleep. *Bridge to Terabithia* obliterated any notions I had of that applying to me. It's about two kids who bond over an imaginary magical land (who would have guessed I loved it, right?) before one of them dies in a tragic accident. Both *Bridge to Terabithia* and *Looking for Alaska* by John Green deal with the unfair suddenness of death, denial, and unresolved grief, and it's worth looking at how they introduce their deaths to accomplish that.

> He watched the car go out of sight and then turned and ran with all his might to the house, the joy jiggling inside of him so hard that he wouldn't have been surprised if his feet had just taken off from the ground the way they sometimes did in dreams and floated him right over the roof.
>
> He was all the way into the kitchen before he realized that something was wrong. His dad's pickup had been outside the door, but he hadn't taken it in until he came into the room and found them all sitting there: his parents and the little girls at the kitchen table and Ellie and Brenda on the couch. Not eating. There was no food on the table. Not watching TV. It wasn't even turned on. He stood unmoving for a second while they stared at him.
>
> Suddenly his mother let out a great shuddering sob. "O my God. O my God." She said it over and over, her head down

> on her arms. His father moved to put his arm around her awkwardly, but he didn't take his eyes off Jess.
>
> "I told ya he just gone off somewhere," May Belle said quietly and stubbornly as though she had repeated it often and no one had believed her.
>
> … Brenda's pouting voice broke in, "Your girlfriend's dead, and Momma thought you was
>
> dead, too."

Firstly, Patterson gives no explanation or gradual lead into the death. Brenda simply says, 'your girlfriend's dead,' and it's almost apathetically sudden. This monumental shift in events is phrased in a cold and factual way. Part of this is how both books purposefully place their deaths off screen, working against the assumption we will get a proper goodbye and depriving us of that catharsis—especially because if main characters die, we expect to be there to see it. Both books place the character death at a point in the narrative where the reader has been promised their character still has stuff to do to resolve their arc and plot lines, as well as in a scene that doesn't usually precipitate death. Leslie and Jess still need to save Terabithia. Alaska and Miles have just begun a relationship of sorts, and Alaska seems ripe for opening up, with the whole story supposedly about to deliver on what has been promised for quite some time.

But death does not wait.

Secondly, both *Bridge to Terabithia* and *Looking for Alaska* use misdirection to lure the reader into a false sense of security by offering an alternative explanation for why everyone is looking worried before revealing the truth. In *Terabithia,* the family is worried about why he disappeared for so long, while in *Looking for Alaska* it's that a teacher had died—something that was even foreshadowed repeatedly in the novel. This gives us momentary relief and makes the reveal all the more shocking and sharper.

These structural choices set up the story to explore feelings of denial and dread leading up to the reveal as the clues stack up. Both stories go on to explore the guilt we feel for not being there and the horror of not knowing what truly happened. How you present the death will change the themes and ideas your story plays with, and if these are the feelings you want to explore, then techniques like this can help you do so.

Off-screen deaths can also happen for other reasons: suspense or because it's inappropriate for your style or genre or age group. A huge number of Disney villains fall to their deaths, usually into some fog or smoke or shadow, because it obscures the violence of their true fate. Alternatively, you might want a character's final moment to be something that occurs before they die. Imagine a father and son are starving in the arctic with dwindling supplies, and to ensure his son survives, the dad goes out into the cold to die. The important moment is the goodbye, not the death. The son not seeing the death may even be important to the father, and it might be presented from the son's perspective. You want the reader's last memory of them to be a moment of love and affection, not a sad and grim fate, even if we know they die.

On the other hand, look at the Tenth Doctor's death from *Doctor Who,* which I have not and will never get over. Ten's death is introduced very gradually. We see it coming for a long time, and he takes a substantial time to die. It's not a gruesome slog of him bleeding out, either. The writer wasn't looking to create the feelings of horror or fear we see in *Misery* nor the shock and unfairness of *Looking for Alaska* (in fact, *Doctor Who* famously telegraphs the deaths of its main character). They wanted us to feel the sorrow and solemnity that comes from the inevitability of death and inability to stop it, ending on the famous phrase, 'I don't want to go.' Before dying, Ten revisits old memories and friends, saying goodbye, in preparation for this end. He's resisting death the entire time, hiding the radiation poisoning for as long as possible. This is a feeling some stories about terminally ill characters channel, and in both cases, that time before death is very important.

While the episode tries to trick you into thinking the Doctor might survive at first, this is only to allow the Doctor to sacrifice his life for someone else—the culmination of his character arc, and an act that gives the death meaning and purpose, as opposed to those in *Looking for Alaska* and *Bridge to Terabithia.*

Sometimes, death scenes are dragged out to help the reader accept the character's death in a bittersweet ending. *Gladiator* ends with the death of Maximus, with him seeing his family in the afterlife in intermittent flashes away from reality. It takes a long time for him to actually die. Where *Bridge to Terabithia*'s suddenness feels horrible because there's no chance to say goodbye or come to terms with it, *Gladiator* provides a catharsis for the

viewer by showing Maximus finally at rest. We are given time to say goodbye. After losing his family at the beginning, he is finally returning to them. His story is tied up. Death itself does not feel like the end or an unjust inevitability—it actually feels more like a reward for all he's gone through. There's no sudden tonal shift like there is in *Looking for Alaska* because the writers wanted death to feel like a natural passage for Maximus' character—we're being told to let him go. By the time he dies, we are *happy* for him. The music even plays into this. There's a hope and peace to it rather than sadness.

As the author, you can use a drawn-out scene to make death easier or harder to accept. In stories about how to face death, that time before the death is precious and tells us a lot about who they are and how we should feel. We take a lot from the framing around a character's end. Other characters' reactions guide our own. All this colours how we are meant to feel about the death: is it a sad inevitability, something we can choose to face bravely, or a final release from suffering?

Juxtaposition

Many of these stories place a contrasting narrative beat next to the death to elevate the emotions on both sides. *Bridge to Terabithia* makes a point of describing how happy Jess is before he learns of Leslie's death, and similarly, *Looking for Alaska* has Miles ecstatic, having finally connected with Alaska it seems—all of which makes the sudden tonal drop more drastic and the pain more sudden. Whiplash against this uplifting emotion can be very effective. I want to show you how I use juxtaposition in 'Two Robots at the End of the World'.[2] It's about, shockingly, two robots called Motherboard and Toaster wandering the ruins of a human city before an unfortunate turn of events gets one of them killed.

> A burning tide was washing over the horizon. It glittered with memory, its many arms propping itself up on the mountain tops.
>
> Four percent.
>
> Toaster had seen many images of humans watching the sunrise and sunset. One of them always rested their head on

> the shoulder of the other. He had no head and Motherboard had no shoulder, but he wheeled himself up onto a rock at her level and tipped his optics screen onto her bonnet. It was growing colder.
>
> ‘Remember to keep your solar plates open, Toaster,’ she said, her audio chip fuzzing out on the last few words.
>
> Clinging to the sunrise, Motherboard used what little power she had left to sear the fire and bronze display onto her optics. It was the last thing she would ever see, a sunrise that would stay with her forever. Crystallised, not bent or refracted, every strand captured perfectly.
>
> Her optics dipped.
>
> ‘Motherboard?’ said Toaster, but he was alone.

Juxtaposing Motherboard’s death with the beautiful sunrise serves to emphasise the grim reality of her death in a way simply describing how horrible, dark, and painful the death is would not. The contrast gives us something beautiful and leaves us with a sense of regret. Motherboard only gets a taste of this beauty she always wanted before she is taken from the world. Juxtaposition like this also complicates the prose in a death scene—beauty in dark times can hold a lot of meaning, like it does for Toaster here. It’s intentionally bittersweet.

In contrast, *Gladiator* uses juxtaposition to help us come to terms with Maximus’ death. His final scenes flicker between the bloody, dry, lifeless arena and the beautiful fields of the afterlife with the gentle touch of wheat buds on his hands. The beauty of the next life only makes the bloody reality of the first worse, and as the scene goes on, you *want* him to move on to this tranquil, beautiful place. When he does, it feels right. It takes away our fears of his death. Death becomes an escape from the suffering of this life and a way to find peace.

Think about what you want your readers to feel about the death, about the character, and how your framing could elevate that. What small thing could you juxtapose the death against in your prose?

Melodrama

Writing death scenes involves handling a lot of intense emotions, and when you really want a reader to feel something, it's easy to fall into ramping up the intensity and display of emotions. Characters might act their feelings out as intensely as you hope the reader will feel them, or you may overstate the emotional response to ensure you *absolutely* get the feeling across. This can sometimes be so melodramatic it detracts from whatever feelings your reader might have experienced. I've been guilty of this, and you probably have too. Think of falling to your knees, reaching your hands to the heavens, or fainting in shock. Darth Vader's reveal in *Revenge of the Sith* was always a little hammy. Even though Anakin *would* feel despondent, the 'Nooooo!' is a little cartoonish. This is not to say these things don't have their place, but we need to think carefully when we use them.

Melodrama tends to strip a scene of subtext—information not explicitly said but playing into the scene. Depth, in other words. A lot can be felt and explored without being explicitly stated.[3] Melodrama can be unconvincing, and even worse can trivialise serious moments. The more fundamental problem is that it isn't immersive—usually because the author is telling us how to feel rather than letting us explore the moment, and we notice that. It draws us out of any emotion we otherwise had. Humans often have a lot going on in their head without it ever coming out in big displays, vocally or physically, and it takes particular kinds of people to express emotion in that way. *The Green Mile* is about an innocent black man, John Coffey, who has been condemned to death and the conflicted feelings of a prison guard, Paul Edgecomb, in carrying out the sentence. A simple handshake between them at the end tells us so much more about their relationship and the pain of what is about to happen. The emotion hits much harder than Darth Vader learning Padme has died, even though the handshake itself is underplayed. How we interact with restraint and when we hold down our emotions is just as important as when we let them out.

On the other hand, *The White Lotus* stars Jennifer Coolidge as Tanya McQuoid, a character prone to frequent displays of melodrama, but it works for her because it fits naturally with everything we know about her

character. More than that, *The White Lotus* is built around melodramatic humour and intentionally channels it.

This connects to the old rule 'show, don't tell', which we discuss in more detail later in this book. The go-to example is having a character clench their fists instead of telling the audience they were angry, but this sometimes leads to over-physicalisation, where *every* emotion is accompanied by some tweak of the lips, some shift in posture, or some flex in their expression. This can come across as melodramatic. Not every emotion is accompanied by these visibly distinct bodily shifts, and focusing on them can make your characters appear over the top.

Are you being melodramatic with your death scene? There's no concrete formula to determine this, as there never is with writing, but we can look at three signs. First, characters should not express emotions disproportionate to the moment at hand compared to how they would *normally* express themselves while the story treats the expression as totally authentic.

Of course, sometimes characters do 'break', expressing radical emotion outside their norm, and a character death is the perfect moment for this to happen. However, these scenes usually only land because of tension leading up to this break and the consequences that tend to follow. A character snapping and seeking revenge can be a compelling narrative development. In *Avatar: The Last Airbender,* Aang 'snaps' when Appa is kidnapped, expressing overwhelming anger and ferocity unlike we have ever seen before. It's one of the few moments in the series where he gives into his anger and willingly kills another creature. It's unlike anything Aang has ever experienced before. He loses the restraint and composure he normally possesses, explaining why this emotion is outside his normal range of expression. It's intended to mark just how personal this was for him.

A second indication of melodrama is characters expressing *everything* they're feeling vocally. This is where the 'stay with me' and 'it's getting dark' clichés come from. Of course, I'd be lying if these moments didn't make me cry when done well. Just because it's a cliché doesn't mean they can't hurt.

Thirdly, it can sound melodramatic to describe how intense an emotion is in the abstract rather than showing its tangible effects, like the character's physical reactions or what the loss or victory means for them. A character dying doesn't just represent pain in a vacuum, it represents somebody losing their oldest friend or mentor, the instability they now feel without

this person to guide them, or losing hope that they might never find happiness. These dimensions make the death matter and shape the scene to your characters' experiences. Figure out what this character dying means to everyone else narratively and psychologically and delve deep into that, especially if their death creates dilemmas or leads to decisions with real consequences.

When I warn not to describe emotions in the abstract, this includes excessive use of metaphor and extended metaphor. Let's take a look at a classic example of melodrama from EL James' *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

> The pain is indescribable… physical, mental… metaphysical…it is everywhere, seeping into the marrow of my bones. Grief. This is grief—and I've brought it on myself. Deep down, a nasty, unbidden thought comes from my inner goddess, her lips contorted in a snarl…the physical pain from the bite of a belt is nothing, nothing compared to this devastation.

Existential pain, relief, or loss after someone's death is very much a thing, but people don't tend to think in these abstract ways. Instead, we think about how we can't get out of bed, how we feel nothing when we pick up a book we used to love, or the empty spaces in a house which the departed once occupied. This is not to say using metaphors to describe emotions is melodramatic, but poetic tools are meant to bring us closer to what the character is truly feeling. Sometimes, they capture things we can't easily literalise, but too many of them can put this emotionally intense moment in a sort of unreal, abstract aether where nothing is truly happening or affecting reality. We can contrast this with how Miles reacts to Alaska's death in *Looking for Alaska*.

> ...gasping, vomiting over and over again, want to melt into the brown, crunchy grass, a dull endless pain in my gut that wouldn't go away even when I knelt on the stingingly frozen tile of the bathroom, dry-heaving.

Very little here is abstract. It's all grounded in very relatable actions, decisions, and reactions. It's not that poetic language isn't used, but it's used very deliberately to highlight particular elements of that emotion.

‘Melting into the brown, crunchy grass’ is really about Miles wanting to disappear, wind back time, and not endure what is currently happening. This is really where you need to listen to beta readers. As authors, it’s very difficult for us to see our work from an outside point of view, and we may not have built up important story beats the way we think we have. Readers might not be convinced of the emotions we want them to feel.

Leaving characters with something unfinished

Perhaps the most heartbreaking death scenes are those where a character has a goal they haven’t yet reached, a conversation they still need to have, an arc they haven’t yet resolved, or something important they still need to do—and yet they die. Nothing is more of a red flag than a character saying, ‘Y’know what, brother? After this battle, I’m gonna retire to my own little farm, start a family, and see my wife again.’ They’re already dead at that point. This is especially painful if they’re close to getting what they need but fall short at the final stretch.

This does two things. First, it’s harder to come to terms with a character’s death when we feel like we haven’t had the catharsis the story says they deserve. Second, it makes the death more unexpected by playing with reader expectations. We expect all subplots and arcs to be tied up before a character is allowed to die. Ned Stark’s death in George RR Martin’s *A Game of Thrones* hits us hard because he still hasn’t spoken to Jon about his parentage, saved his family, nor reconnected with Catelyn. John Green captures this in Alaska’s unexplored relationship with Miles, giving us this line: ‘*Don’t. I have just begun to kiss her*.’ In *Bridge to Terabithia,* Jess and Leslie still need to save their imaginary kingdom when she dies. The Tenth Doctor’s whole schtick was that he felt he could do so much more if he lived.

I’ve consistently found the most painful deaths leave me with these unresolved feelings by depriving me of that catharsis. We addressed sudden versus expected deaths before. We don’t expect character deaths when their stories aren’t finished on a meta-narrative level, and leaving something

unfinished can feed into that sense of unfairness—into how death doesn't wait for us to tie up our plotlines.

On the other hand, we can complicate the reader's feelings about a character's death by showing the character is *willing* to die while leaving some things unfinished. Snape's death from the *Harry Potter* series does this. He dies in *The Deathly Hallows* knowing he was protecting Harry and that Harry knows this, but he won't know whether Harry will succeed and if his sacrifice will be worth anything, or whether he will get revenge for Lily Potter. In deaths like this, there's a tension between unfairness and catharsis.

At the same time, we *love* stories where characters are 'finished' before they die, such as with *Gladiator*. Maximus has gotten his revenge, brought down an empire, and now can join his family in the afterlife. We love fiction with this kind of security, even if it's heartbreaking and moving in a different way. We're sad because they're dying, but in a twisted way, it's a kind of a happy ending—especially if they died heroically. The death is bittersweet, but we don't have any unresolved tension. It gives us hope people can change and death won't get in the way, giving a sense that the world accords to some kind of order and allows us to finish our arcs. There is a mythic quality to it that only fiction can give us.

These two approaches create different feelings in the reader, and it's up to you to figure out which will drive home the experience you want to give. Do you want them feeling unresolved, sad but understanding, or somewhere in between?

Injustice or unfairness

If you really want to make your character's death even more painful, make it unfair or unjust. They didn't deserve it; it's pointless suffering; it's inevitable, but it never needed to be; it's not even the consequences of their own actions; they're caught up in the idiocy of other characters; it's an accident in the wrong place at the wrong time. Think about the deaths which impacted you the most. For me, Donna Noble from *Doctor Who* would be up there. Technically, she doesn't die, but instead she loses all her memories and the person she has grown to become across the story. It's

functionally death of the person we have come to love. Her whole character arc is sacrificed to bring it to its culmination.

Donna began as someone who saw herself as worthless and unremarkable, but over the story grows to see herself as capable and someone of value, worthy of respect and recognition. More than anyone, she deserves to keep her experiences of travelling with the Doctor. It's made even worse by the Doctor being forced to *take* those memories from her in order to save her life. There's an extra layer of injustice for the Doctor because he has to do this to a friend. She begs him to not take the memories, knowing full well who she will regress to, but the alternative is death. Injustice and unfairness create a different kind of empathy in the reader, but it can also create hatred and resentment for those who caused the death in a way that, say, dying in a duel between two equally matched opponents wouldn't. It's also a great way to spark powerful emotions in those around them, prompting vengeance quests or character action with motivations that resonate with the reader. Justice is something we can all get behind.

Giving deaths a second narrative purpose

A character death isn't always just about the character that dies, but how it motivates, changes, or damages those around them. A death can retroactively become sadder or more meaningful by the events that follow. It adds extra weight on re-reading. Unfairness, injustice, or something being left unfinished will often have major consequences for the remaining characters, and unfinished plot threads are a great way to leave other characters dealing with the fallout of the death. When Ned Stark dies in *A Game of Thrones,* he hasn't yet told Jon about his true parentage, and Jon is left grappling with that. Ned's goal was to protect his family from the Lannisters, and now that duty falls to Robb Stark—who is named King in the North by the northern lords (who are also responding to Ned's death) and begins a rebellion. Arya is left to flee the capital and seek vengeance against all those who wronged her, including those who got Ned killed—a motive that leads her to become a faceless assassin. Sansa is left in the

dangerous political maw of King's Landing and must learn to navigate its harsh realities on her own. On top of this, Ned's death represents 'the death of chivalry' in this fantasy world. It demonstrates to the reader that anyone can die, including our main character, and that being good and noble is no guarantee of success. It changes the moral architecture of the story. As Varys later says: 'It was not wine that killed [King Robert]. It was your mercy.' Ned's mercy is also, in the end, the thing that gets himself killed.

These plot threads give narrative weight and purpose to Ned's death. It's not just a plot point our characters are sad about or a moment used to shock the reader. It changes the direction of the entire narrative and is the inciting incident for several other characters to begin their own stories. In the long term, readers gain some catharsis as other characters fill the holes Ned left behind or get justice where he could not.

In *Up,* Ellie Fredrickson always wanted to see Paradise Falls but died before she ever could. Carl seeks it out as a way of finding some closure. Think about the purpose the death serves as a structural point in your narrative. If your book was a piece of architecture and the death was a load-bearing beam, what would it be holding up?

Unfairness and injustice can also come from how a death affects the characters around the deceased. Some people say a reader *needs* to know a character well to care about them, but I'm not entirely convinced. A character dying can still mean a lot, so long as we know what that person represented to someone else. In 'What Remains of Maya Sankovy' by GD Angier, an artificial intelligence is tasked with playing the mother of human children on a new planet. We know little about their first child, Daisy, but we *do* know what successfully bringing this first child into the world means to the AI.

> We see Daisy's dandelion head bob up and down on the waves. She's unconscious. A small speck in a sea of rust and scarlet.
>
> ...We feel the heat of our components and see the warnings emerge in our field of vision. We fight against the waves, against the errors. They swallow Daisy, pull her little body under. We dive, bump into a sharp stone with our knee before our hands grab Daisy's shoulder.

> We carry her to shore. Her body is weightless, we are weightless. We lay her down, stretch her neck, give CPR, and pump air into her lungs. Three rounds. Three terrible new memories. Then, Daisy convulses. Spews out the water she swallowed. Only a little bit of dying today.
>
> We cry out. We hug her, whisper her name against her hair, tell her we love her so so much. Stupid child, we say, but do not mean it. Daisy shakes and we cry without tears.

This child is her firstborn, her purpose, and everything she hopes to be. She is her hope and shining light in the world, and it hurts immensely when she dies a little later in the story. For an AI whose entire purpose is to foster a new civilisation, the first child would be everything. The point here is you can craft a great death scene with what surrounds the death, by what we might call the scaffolding of a scene, even when we don't know the character that well.

Be careful to avoid 'fridging' here: killing off (usually female) characters with no agency of their own purely to motivate their (usually male) counterparts. It's a trope that dates back as long as history goes, but the name comes from a 1994 *Green Lantern* comic (Vol 3, Issue 54), where Kyle Rayner discovers his girlfriend has been murdered and her body placed into a refrigerator. While killing characters to motivate others is fine in the abstract, be careful when objectifying characters by making this their only role in the story and the wider connotations that might have. If it's often characters of a specific demographic, ask yourself why that is.

There are fates better than death

It's easier to do a cheap death than a meaningful life. Brandon Sanderson once said:

> 'There are so many things worse than death that can happen to your characters… I can't just default to it because I think that's the only way to move the story forward or because I want the reader to feel loss.'

He's absolutely right. Death is a tool, but it's not necessarily the most meaningful or even painful end to a character, and your job as the writer is to figure out which ending hits home the hardest in the ways you want. You can tell when a character death is purely for shock value because their death doesn't echo through the narrative. Death is a terrible thing that carries a lot of intense emotions for the surrounding survivors, but it can feel meaningless without real consequences. Donna losing her memories in *Doctor Who* is far more painful and meaningful than her simply dying because she loses her character growth and all her experiences through no real fault of her own, and only because she sought to save others. There's a sad permanence to her loss death could never cover, brought home when she speaks of feeling like she's forgotten something important but can never put her finger on what. Only you can figure out the most meaningful end for your characters, but here are some tools I use to do so.

I'm a big fan of literary symmetry, where beats or imagery later in a story reflect moments from earlier on. This can add context and meaning to the latter scene and enrich the original one. Imagine a warmonger who swore to burn down a city eventually coming to defend it, or a daughter forced to be independent because her mother is an alcoholic, only to do the same thing to her daughter years down the track.

Literary symmetry is also incredibly common with villain deaths. Harry Potter survived Voldemort in the first book because his mother's love gave him a magical protection, and in *The Deathly Hallows,* everybody else is protected from Voldemort because of Harry's loving sacrifice for his friends. In *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* by Victor Hugo*,* Count Frollo, after spending his time pontificating about the fires of hell, sin, and eternal punishment, falls from the cathedral peak into a fiery pit himself. There's a satisfying irony to both deaths.

You can draw a lot of tension from things that aren't death. Explore a character's weaknesses, fears, and what would contrast with their arc across the story. Their way of life, values, personality, status, and autonomy can all be damaged, taken, or utterly destroyed. This is often more feasible and convincing than threatening to kill them because, on some level, a lot of readers just don't think the main character *can* die. Nobody thinks the Doctor will ever permanently die in *Doctor Who*. Companions, sure, they're a dime a dozen, but for him, it's just not on the cards. Because of this, the high points of tension threaten fates worse than death for him: losing

memories, being left utterly alone as the last time lord, losing people around him, losing his morality. These all take into account the Doctor's deepest struggles and weaknesses and turn them on their head.

Redemption arcs often use character death as a climax, concluding with the now-redeemed hero sacrificing their life in some kind of ultimate proof of their goodness, but personally, I don't like that. What does redemption mean? It's not simply choosing good once but facing up to one's past and reckoning with it. If they wronged someone, then finding a way to correct that is more meaningful. Being forced to live with the past means understanding it and dealing with it, while death can sometimes be a bit of a 'get out of jail free card', narratively speaking. What does it mean to choose to be a good person every day? Good writing doesn't just end a character's arc in an emotionally resonant way, but a narratively meaningful way. We can use these fates to explore our themes, create connections between beats in our stories—even between the beginning and ending, and give the story value on rereading. If you'd like to explore redemption arcs more, than check out *Volume I* and *Volume II* of this series.

Whether you want a character to meet a happy, painful, or bittersweet ending, consider literary symmetry and fates that interact with their weaknesses, arc, and fears.

Summary

1. Visceral bodily descriptors can create fear and horror in a death scene, making the reader uncomfortable, while more abstract language allows us to focus on emotions like sorrow and love rather than the very real pain they must be experiencing.
2. Suddenly introducing death or placing it offscreen helps the reader explore denial, unresolved grief, and the unfairness of death. Misdirection can lure the reader into a false sense of security that makes the reveal more impactful.
3. Longer death scenes can foster an exploration of powerlessness and the inevitability of death, but they can also guide the reader into accepting a bittersweet ending.
4. Juxtaposition can add depth to your prose and make a character's death easier or harder to process, especially if it

creates tonal whiplash.

5. Melodrama strips a scene of subtext, is usually less immersive, and is often the result of trying to get the reader to feel something by ramping up the intensity of emotions. It's often marked by disproportionate reactions, clichés, excessive metaphor, and describing feelings in the abstract.
6. Leaving the characters with something unfinished or making the death unjust and unfair is a great way to make your death hurt more. It can also make it more unexpected and deprive the reader of catharsis. Unfinished plot threads are a great way to give death a second purpose.
7. Death is not always the most hard-hitting ending. Consider what might be the most meaningful fate for a character, taking account of their arc, their fears, their strengths, and literary symmetry.

DIALOGUE

It's Kind of a Funny Story by Ned Vizinni
'Cane Sprouts' by Hannah Lee Kidder
Mistborn: The Final Empire by Brandon Sanderson
The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo by Steig Larsson
The Northern Lights by Philip Pullman
A Song of Ice and Fire by George RR Martin
Annihilation by Jeff VanderMeer
The X Files
Better Call Saul
House of Leaves by Mark Z Danielewski
Pirates of the Caribbean: Curse of the Black Pearl
The Great Gatsby by F Scott Fitzgerald

Dialogue is complicated. It's difficult to make it sound natural, to give it depth, and to make everyone sound distinct but not so different that they're gimmicky. This is especially true because dialogue is often incredibly stylistic and unrealistic, yet still needs to be compelling. One of the easiest ways to improve our writing is to get better at the fundamentals: grammar, diction, and in this case, dialogue. A few tweaks and tips can go a long way, giving you more control over your writing on a line-by-line level.

Dialogue tags versus action tags

Dialogue tags are words like said or shouted, while action tags describe a character doing something while simultaneously indicating the speaker. Understanding how and when to use both is one of the easiest ways to improve the flow of your dialogue. Let's look at how Ned Vizinni handles dialogue between lots of characters—a boy, his mother, a doctor, a nurse, and a police officer—in *It's Kind of a Funny* Story.

> 'I know.' I hold her back.
> 'Mrs. Gilner—'

> ‘She really needs to leave with the dog,’ the nurse says.
> ‘She has a dog? Dogs are against policy,’ Chris says.
> ‘Just one second,’ Dr Mahmoud says.
> We all look at him.
> ‘Alright, Mrs. Gilner, since you’re here, your son has checked himself in due to suicidal ideation and acute depression, you understand?’
> ‘Yes.’
> ‘He was on his Zoloft but he stopped taking it.’
> ‘You did?’ Mom turns to me.
> ‘I thought I was better.’ I shrug.
> ‘Stubborn like your father. Yes, Doctor?’
> ‘Well, the next question is for Craig. Craig, would you like to be admitted?’
> … ‘Yes,’ I say.

Vizinni uses four dialogue tags, all of which are ‘says’ or ‘say’, but he also replaces a couple of dialogue tags with action tags: ‘I hold her back’ and ‘Mom turns to me.’ Action tags tell us who said the line and give a bit of movement and variety to the scene, especially because they can go before, after, or even during a line. They can be great replacements for what could otherwise be repetitive dialogue tags. More importantly, they develop important dynamics in the scene: Craig’s discomfort with his mother’s overbearing nature and his mother’s shock at him stopping his medication.

Action tags allow you to control the pacing of a scene. If you want to slow an exchange down or have the reader focus on a particular line or dynamic, then characters moving a chair, closing a door behind them, or cleaning their glasses is one way to do that. This can signal something is more important, especially as the action undertaken will arise out of the emotions or connotations of whatever has been said. Because of this, action beats can also help indicate the cadence or pacing of a line to follow.

> She evaluates me, head to toe. ‘I see you’ve been feeding yourself just fine.’

This is from Hannah Lee Kidder’s ‘Cane Sprouts’. The woman looking this girl up and down brings out the passive-aggression in the line that

follows. We're primed to read it like someone pronouncing judgment. Action tags like this help us *show* rather than *tell*, but relying on them too much can see your dialogue devolve into something like the following:

> 'Just one second.' Dr Mahmoud checked his notebook.
> We all look at him.
> 'Alright, Mrs. Gilner, you understand your son has checked himself in?' He opened the window to let in some fresh air.
> 'Yes.' His mother nodded anxiously.
> Mr Mahmoud sat down at his desk. 'He was on his Zoloft but he stopped taking it.'

See how clunky this is? Here, characters are *doing* things, but they don't really mean anything. It adds variety, but the dialogue feels slow, like it's stopping and starting repeatedly, dwelling on lines that don't mean much in isolation. It's not the worst writing, but it's certainly not as tight as the original scene. Vizinni only drops an action tag when it's revealed Craig hasn't been taking his medication—a revelation that sparks new emotions in the scene. People often rely on action tags too much because they're afraid of using dialogue tags or feeling like their characters are speaking in a vacuum, but I've found cutting these sorts of action tags and just letting the characters talk is often the easiest way to quickly improve dialogue. Too many action tags dilute their effect and stunt your pacing, especially because readers *will* imagine characters doing things as they speak, anyway. If someone is shouting, we'll easily imagine them throwing their hands up or narrowing their eyes. Instead, it can make a scene feel like characters are awkwardly pausing and dramatically physicalising every time they say something.

When working action tags into your dialogue, mark out the few more important lines that develop the dynamics of your scene, where the scene ramps up in tension, or where something changes.

What about dialogue tags? Said, shouted, cried, exclaimed, burst, ejaculated—they all have their place.[4] *Said* (or *says*, in present tense) is probably the most important dialogue tag in the English language, and you're likely to be using it the most of all, and here's why. When we look at how said/says is used in the passage from *It's Kind of a Funny Story,* we

find it used for clarity when characters are conversing in quick succession, or to mark when new characters jump in. Says/said doesn't imply *how* they speak, just who is speaking, operating more like punctuation than actual words you really read. Our brains skip over it, absorbing what it indicates but attributing little else to it. We don't assume that because someone 'says' something that they're speaking slowly or quickly or urgently or pleadingly.

People advise against using bookisms like yelled, swore, or growled a lot because said encompasses a lot of different ways we say things now. This is why answered, replied, queried, or commented so often read as clunky; like said, they're placeholder dialogue tags which don't bring any connotations of their own, but they're worse because the reader snags on them and what you might mean. When said is used, we infer how things are said from context, the character as we know them, the dialogue itself, and punctuation like exclamation marks. It encompasses a range of expression which may even incorporate the sense of someone shouting, growling, or bleating. If your characters are constantly chirping, growling, and muttering, they can come across as melodramatic. These words can indicate lines are more intense than you might intend, especially because an action tag might more effectively convey this nuance. Consider the following examples, the first which uses a dialogue tag, and the second with an action tag.

> 'Please, just let them go. Take me instead,' he begged.

> 'Please, just let them go.' He moved between the man and the door, tears in his eyes. 'Take me instead.'

The action tag is much stronger, showing the man's desperation and raising the tension in the scene. While 'begged' tries to do the same, it's not as effective.

This is not to say these types of dialogue tags should never be used, be it shouted, cried, or indeed ejaculated. Well, with ejaculated, probably never anymore, but the others are perfectly useful. For a rough idea of proportions, I went through the first one-hundred dialogue tags of Stephen King's *The Mist* and Brandon Sanderson's *Mistborn,* both of whom are prolific modern authors whose styles might help us understand how often tags like these are used. About ten to fifteen percent of their dialogue tags were other words, though a lot of those were 'asked', another invisible tag like said.

This is not a perfect metric or a golden rule, but it's a good baseline to consider. Some authors may use far more or less of these words, some genres lean into those extremities, and your personal style is perfectly valid. The point is, I found authors overwhelmingly relied on said over the plethora of other tags. Unless there's a major shift in this style, this is what readers are used to.

Using them sparingly in mind, when *should* you use something other than said? One way to use different tags is to give information that's not immediately apparent in the dialogue itself. Sanderson has pointed out that words like *whispered* and *shouted* tend to fall under this umbrella.

> She started to sniffle again, and he put a fatherly arm around her. She pulled close, trying to use his warmth to push away the pain.
> 'I loved him, Kelsier,' she whispered.
> 'Elend? I know.'

'Whispered' clarifies the way she speaks and doesn't come across as melodramatic at all, given the context. Tags can also communicate a shift in gear in the scene, ramping up or down, a change in pacing, or a change in a character's mood. Consider how Larsson uses 'gasped' in the following passage from *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*.

> 'But why Harriet? Your own sister?'
> In a second Martin grabbed him by the hair.
> 'What happened to her, you little bastard? Tell me.'
> 'What do you mean?' Blomkvist gasped. He tried to turn his head to lessen the pain in his scalp. The chain tightened around his neck.

Despite this being a tense scene from the start, up until this point, Blomkvist and Vanger had gone back and forth using said. It's only when Blomkvist enrages the serial killer, bringing him closer to death, that we see gasped. It marks the tension ramping up. A similar thing happens a few pages later when the tension ramps up again as Salander arrives on the scene.

> Blomkvist heard Salander's voice through a red fog. He managed to focus his eyes enough to see her standing in the doorway. She was looking at Martin Vanger without expression.
>
> 'No… run,' he croaked.

Salander's arrival is a wrench in the works for Vanger. This beat puts more people at risk, raising the tension, while also inspiring hope and fear. Dialogue tags like this can indicate a change in how a character is speaking or feeling—from normal to shouting, from shouting to crying, or from speaking to gasping. These can amplify beats where the tension ramps either up or down, where a power or emotional dynamic changes, or you want to elevate a particular moment or character beat. It's a nice little marker inside the dialogue to reflect that.

However, sometimes these words are just shorthand ways of indicating intensity, sarcasm, cadence, emotion, or contrasting two characters when you don't want to spend too many words on doing so, and that's okay. Action tags are expensive in your word economy. 'Show, don't tell' is generally helpful, but it's not universal. Not everything needs to come out in posture, expression, or action, and forcing it to can be awkward. Sometimes, showing how a character speaks with dialogue tags is just more efficient.

It takes practise to find a balance between dialogue tags and action tags. Consider them like salt and pepper—you need both, but too much of either and you'll spoil the dish. Think of alternate dialogue tags like *shouted* and *whispered* like jalapeño or cayenne pepper; they can make things interesting in small amounts, but overdoing it keeps your reader from enjoying the underlying flavours.

Let your damn characters talk

I read pieces all the time where the author refuses to let characters go on for more than a couple of lines without inserting an action tag or some prose. Sometimes, this is because writing dialogue takes much longer than reading it, meaning we trick ourselves into thinking characters are trapped in a vacuum after one or two lines. We get this urge to add in more variety

when it's not always necessary. Other times, it's because we lean too much into 'show, don't tell' for the reasons previously mentioned.

Once Vizinni establishes Dr Mahmoud and Mrs Gilner are speaking, they go back and forth for a couple of lines with no dialogue or action tags. We don't need to indicate who is talking because the reader can easily figure it out, and there's no shift in the scene which needs to be marked. Vizinni only marks when a new character speaks or a point of tension is introduced.

In *The Northern Lights,* Philip Pullman has Lyra and the Professor go back and forth for three whole pages with only five dialogue tags and two real action tags. *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* has two pages with only a couple tags here and there. These authors trust the reader to follow what's happening and let themselves get immersed in the dialogue. This is not to say you should *always* do this, but it shows how far you can take it if you wish. If you want to make your dialogue smoother, consider taking out the constant interruptions which don't elevate your interactions. In other words, let your damn characters talk.

However, stripping your dialogue of any prose or tags can lead to what is sometimes called 'talking heads', where the reader has no idea how to visualise the scene around the characters speaking. It can be jarring for a character to suddenly pick up a chicken when the reader thinks they are in a dairy. If a character is terrified, but we have no real grasp of their surroundings or what they're afraid of, it can create an odd dissonance, especially if you later reveal something way outside anything we naturally imagine. Pullman and Larsson both painstakingly set the scene beforehand, establishing things characters will interact with later as they talk, creating a continuity in the physical space, and giving the characters action beats to physicalise as they speak. It helps to clarify when characters enter a new setting, encounter an obstacle, or find a tool which returns later in a scene. All of this means that when they *do* let their characters talk for pages without interruption or tag, the reader already has a perfect vision of what is happening and physical features don't come out of nowhere.

Character voice in dialogue

How do you get your characters to sound like real people? Writing advice around character voice tends to focus on *how* people say things—word choice and syntax—but the *role* characters play in dialogue scenes and the *focus* of their speech are typically stronger indications. Look at how Tyrion speaks in George RR Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series.

> 'I think not,' Tyrion said. 'If you wanted me dead, you had only to say the word, and one of these staunch friends of yours would gladly have given me a red smile.'
>
> 'Singer,' Tyrion said, turning to Marillion, 'when you make a ballad of this, be certain you tell them how Lady Arryn denied the dwarf the right to a champion, and sent him forth lame and bruised and hobbling to face her finest knight.'
>
> 'You're asking a lame man to teach a cripple how to dance,' Tyrion said. 'However sincere the lesson, the result is likely to be grotesque.'

Tyrion Lannister focuses on cruelties, how humiliating something might be for him or others, and how it affects the outcasts, all because he is familiar with cruelty and is an outcast himself. He has the same education, vocabulary, class, syntax, and accent as Tywin Lannister, but he sounds totally different because of his focus and framing. Faced with the same questions, Tywin might focus on the damage done to the Lannister family name—something he continually prioritises over anything else.

Characters will blur together on the page when they approach discussions from the same angle, raise the same issues and concerns, mirror each other's points and ideas, and reach the same conclusions—especially in scenes where characters aren't in direct conflict. By giving characters a different angle, a different aspect of the discussion to focus on, their distinct voice comes out. Instead of thinking about a scene as 'my characters talk about [x]', divide the concerns and points amongst the characters, sharpen them, and let those differences play out. It doesn't need to be confrontational, and it can be subtle. This doesn't necessarily make it an

argument, but it shows how different people might approach the same question. Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* does this well in a scene where four characters find some strange alien writing on the wall and are trying to figure out what it might mean (I've removed the prose as it's not relevant to the discussion here).

> BIOLOGIST: Some sort of fungi. The letters are made from fruiting bodies.
> SURVEYOR: Words? Made of fungi?
> ANTHROPOLOGIST: There is no recorded human language that uses this method of writing. Is there any animal that communicates this way?
> BIOLOGIST: No, there is no animal that communicates this way.
> SURVEYOR: Are you joking? This is a joke, right?
> BIOLOGIST: Fruiting bodies. Forming words.

The biologist focuses on the strange role fruiting bodies play in the writing, with her curiosity at the forefront. The surveyor, who isn't quite a 'believer' in what's going on here, searches for alternative explanations. Meanwhile, the anthropologist, a more solution-focused character, focuses on reasoning how this might have come to be and understanding what it might mean for the mission. The biologist could have reasonably said, 'It's some sort of fungi. I can't think of any animal that writes like this. It can't be a good sign, can it?' Instead, VanderMeer divides these focuses amongst the characters by what fits them most, giving them more distinct character voices. It's not quite character conflict, but instead showing different character perspectives.

Paying attention to the focus and role of a character's dialogue also infuses it with a more important kind of character subtext—their needs, wants, strengths, and weaknesses. Word choice and syntax can do this too, though not as effectively. In *The X Files,* Scully is the sceptic about aliens and strange happenings while Mulder is the believer, the theorist, and the wild thinker. The writers could have had both be sceptics, but their dialogue comes alive because of the distinct roles they play in any given scene.

Consider what your characters can bring to their dialogue that others wouldn't. A pessimist might focus on the dangers. An overconfident

character might gloss over their weaknesses and focus on their strengths. The lancer might get competitive with the leader. The heart might be worried about who gets hurt. The thinker might be coming up with inventive solutions.

Better Call Saul's Jimmy McGill is a salesman at every turn, no matter the context, hyping up the pros and downplaying the cons, interrupting and redirecting to control the conversation. While leaning too hard into this can feel clichéd, allowing characters to take on broadly different roles in a scene will help bring out their character voice.

But what about all that other stuff—their education, vocabulary, class, age, accent, etcetera? All these absolutely impact the words and expressions we use, our syntax, how long we take to express things, how forceful, restrained, or poetic we might be, how much we listen to or speak over others, and more. An upper-class person might always use their manners, a child is more likely to get distracted as they speak, and a sailor might be more likely to swear. *House of Leaves* by Mark Z Danielewski has some incredible examples of this in the different character voices he employs for different narrators.

> ...I'm possessed by an eerie presentiment that all is not well. Was it your leaving that seemed to offer up a discordant note? The way you turned your back on your mother, and not only looked back twice, not that twice shouldn't have been more than enough, after all once was too much for Orpheus, but your looking seemed to signal in my heart some message of mortal wrong.
>
> [This] frat boy, swaying back and forth before me like an idiot, raises his ax even higher above his head. His plan I see is not too complicated: he intends to drive that heavy blade into my skull, across the bridge of my nose, cleave the roof of my mouth, the core of my brain, split apart the vertebrae in my neck, and he won't stop there either.

Look at how much we know about these people just by their diction, syntax, and phrasing. The mother's word choice tells us she's educated, possibly upper-class, likely a fair bit older. She clearly overthinks, and that spills out in a tangential word-salad. The term 'mother' rather than 'mum'

makes her seem overly composed, perhaps a little distant. Her comparison to Orpheus makes her seem a little pretentious. In the second example, the language is plain, gritty, and relatively simple. This is a straight-forward man. He's smart, but not pretentious. His readiness to speak to such intense violence, even focus on it, says he's familiar with it or perhaps finds it interesting. The term 'frat boy' is derogatory, telling us he's probably a bit older than a 'frat boy' might be and considers himself wiser, smarter, and more level-headed.

These techniques need to be combined with role and focus, often overlapping. Together, they give rise to distinct characters with their own voice who play interesting roles in the scenes they're in.

Both *House of Leaves* and *Annihilation* rely on another element beneath all this: contrast between characters. Let's consider a few easy ways to do that.

First, consider speaking patterns in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies. Captain Jack Sparrow is known for his long-winded, tangential ramblings, which he often uses to get out of a life-threatening situation. His words are often littered with lies and half-truths intended to confuse an enemy. Will Turner, on the other hand, is honest to a fault. His dialogue is short and direct, and he is often too loud, impulsive, and honest for his own good. This can change from scene to scene for your characters, but keep in mind whether they speak emotively or stick to the cold, hard facts. Do they phrase things as certainties or use a lot of 'maybe', 'might', and 'if it's okay'?

Secondly, word choice is a useful way to differentiate and develop characters. In *The Great Gatsby,* Gatsby is the only character to use the term 'old sport', and he uses it cartoonishly often. The term 'old sport' gives an impression of maturity and aristocracy, but its overuse also brings out how out of place he is. He is trying to foster this image of wealth and class, but it's an illusion. My wife enlightened me to how often I use the terms 'fundamentally' and 'notorious' whilst she never hears anyone else use them. These two recurring words make my voice distinct in her mind. Consider giving characters words or phrases they use more than others might.

Thirdly, you can contrast characters by having them use different metaphors and comparisons. This line from *Annihilation* is a good example of doing just that.

> The surveyor spoke. ‘In this case I feel that we should rule out the tunnel as something invasive or threatening. Before we explore further. It’s like an enemy at our backs otherwise if we press forward.’

The Surveyor has a military background and frames the tunnel with a military simile. Part of how we confront problems is finding connections to challenges we’ve encountered before, and that comes out in how we speak. What comparisons might your characters naturally leap to, and what metaphors would come to them? If the biologist were speaking here, they might compare it to leaving rot unchecked.

Finally, you can contrast characters with how their dialogue literally looks on the page. This is a simple visual cue. This means not just how your characters talk, but who interrupts who, who has the last word, who dominates the conversation, and who takes a backseat.

While you don’t need to use all these tools to contrast in how characters speak, using a few of them in a scene will help sharpen the differences between your characters and develop their voices and dynamics.

It’s okay if your characters sound the same sometimes

We focus a lot on how to make characters sound different, but there are too many stories where characters become caricatures of contrast—especially when accents and commas get involved. This is rooted in a common piece of writing advice: that you should be able to tell who is speaking even if you took away dialogue tags. This is only sometimes helpful, and it all too often leads people down the wrong rabbit holes where they end up writing cartoonish characters. Yes, you want characters to sound distinct, but a lot of what we might say could be said in the exact same way by a lot of people, and that’s okay. This is why I prefer to look at *focus* and *role* in dialogue—because people might use the same words, accent, and phrasing, but your focus still clearly indicates one character over another. Throwing in bizarre metaphors, turns of phrase, whack job accents, and exaggerations at every turn is not the answer.

The golden rule is this: not *every* piece of dialogue needs to sound like it could only come from one character, but every character needs *some* dialogue than only sounds like them.

Realistic dialogue

'Realistic dialogue' is a bit of a rabbit hole. It's what some writers aspire to, a holy grail, because we all want our characters to feel *real*, and surely realistic dialogue is one way to do that. The advice you'll find at every turn is to 'listen to how people talk', but what does that even mean? Everyone speaks differently, especially fictional people, and dialogue in real life is full of pointless tangents, nonsensical metaphor, and dead ends, whereas fictional dialogue *always* has a point. We are creating the illusion of realism and hoping our readers buy into it.

A neat way to conjure this illusion is to let your dialogue be a little out of order. When we're talking, we don't always perfectly follow on from what others are saying. We focus on different aspects of a conversation, driving it back towards our interest. We don't respond directly or we introduce secondary concerns, which in turn sparks tangents, and all this makes a conversation just a little out of step. Let's return to that piece from *Annihilation* again, but we'll number the different conversation threads and how they play out:

> BIOLOGIST: [1] Some sort of fungi. The letters are made from fruiting bodies.
> SURVEYOR: [2] Words? Made of fungi?
> ANTHROPOLOGIST: [3] There is no recorded human language that uses this method of writing. Is there any animal that communicates this way?
> BIOLOGIST: [3] No, there is no animal that communicates this way.
> SURVEYOR: [2] Are you joking? This is a joke, right?
> BIOLOGIST: [1] Fruiting bodies. Forming words.

All three characters are talking about the fungus but on slightly different conversation threads, each hoping to take it in their direction. The biologist

frames it as this fascinating phenomenon, the anthropologist frames it as something outside human civilisation, and the surveyor is disconcerted by whatever they've found, hoping to get the others to realise how dangerous this might be. The biologist *does* directly respond to the anthropologist's question but not the surveyor's, whose thread goes unanswered until later in the scene. These conversational threads all develop, but out of order and sync with each other. Imagine if instead the scene were written like this:

> ANTHROPOLOGIST: [1] It's some sort of fungi.
> BIOLOGIST: [1] Yes. The letters are made from fruiting bodies. Forming words.
> ANTHROPOLOGIST: [2] Is there any animal that communicates this way?
> BIOLOGIST: [2] No, there is no animal that communicates this way.
> ANTHROPOLOGIST: [2] There is no recorded human language that uses this method of writing.
> BIOLOGIST: [2] Then who wrote this?
> SURVEYOR: [3] Are you joking? This is a joke, right?
> BIOLOGIST: [3] I don't think so.
> ANTHROPOLOGIST: [3] Not after everything we've seen.

Here, the threads are each introduced and addressed one by one. It's not *terrible* writing, but it feels a little more stilted, like everyone is waiting their turn. People don't do this when they're talking naturally. We're all thinking and feeling at the same time, meaning all these threads get tangled up. There's an order to this rewrite that doesn't quite feel real, but this is an easy trap to fall into. Consider jumbling up your dialogue threads a bit with characters reacting to some but not others, making assertions before responding to what was said before, or shifting the focus to something else before coming back to the original point. One easy way to do this is to draw on the focus and role each character has. Some threads will dominate the conversation while others will pop up here and there, but multiple will probably be introduced at the same time.

People will also often speak in grammatically incorrect ways: half sentences, run-on sentences, and often cutting off the beginning or end to just say the core bit. When the biologist says, 'Fruiting bodies. Forming

words,' this is just how her thought process sounds—these fragments, especially in a more casual setting or where she's speaking to herself more than other people, feels more natural. We speak more in full sentences when we want to take control of a situation, appear more formal or professional, or communicate more clearly, but playing with our syntax and grammar is very human.[5]

Dialogue versus summarising

You don't need to write out every exchange your characters have in dialogue in the same way you also don't describe every movement a character makes. Oftentimes, we'll describe the points on either side of a conversation or action and allow the reader to assume what happened in between, especially if it's relatively unimportant. Luckily, novels can also do something other mediums can't as naturally: summarise. Consider the following passage.

> A call from my mom a few weeks later reminded me just how far from home I was. She talked about her blooming chrysanthemums, that she had learned to play Debussy's *Claire de Lune* on the piano, and that Danny was following in my footsteps and excelling in math and physics. The weather had been hot, the days long, and the flowers, leaves, and trees had all come out in company. William was out of the picture, but she was brighter with every note. Yet as I listened to Mom telling me about all the things that had changed, it was apparent how much had remained the same too.
>
> She was a better person than me.
>
> 'Hey Mom?' I said as she went to end the call.
>
> 'Yes?'
>
> 'I love you.'
>
> A fleeting pause tagged the end of the sentence.
>
> 'I love you too, James.'
>
> I realized she had been waiting for a '—but'; silence is the sound of something said far too rarely.

In this scene, my character tells his mum he loves her for the first time in a while. It's an important story beat, but I didn't want his mum to feature personally in the story too much, nor did I want to spend a lot of time on the small talk. Instead, I summarised the *feeling* and flow of the conversation, as that was the more important part anyway, and only used dialogue to lay out that pivotal moment at the end.

Sometimes, you write yourself into a corner where you need to have a few different conversations in the same scene, but it's awkward to segue between them. Summarising can obscure that awkward segue, breaking up the conversation, and only cutting back into fully laid out dialogue with the parts the reader cares about and that drives the story forward.

Another common piece of advice is to 'enter late; leave early', and that's where summarising comes in. Ever wondered why nobody ever says 'hello' in films and just hangs up without a 'goodbye'? Oftentimes, we'll just assume the pleasantries as a given if the prose allows for it, such as with this extract from *The Northern Lights*.

> The sky was lighter already; there was a faint fresh stir in the air.
>
> 'What's that you've got?' said Mrs. Lonsdale, closing the battered little suitcase with a snap.
>
> 'The Master gave it to me. Can't it go in the suitcase?'
>
> 'Too late. I'm not opening it now. It'll have to go in your coat pocket, whatever it is. Hurry on down to the buttery; don't keep them waiting… '
>
> It was only after she'd said goodbye to the few servants who were up, and to Mrs. Lonsdale, that she remembered Roger; and then she felt guilty for not having thought of him once since meeting Mrs. Coulter.

Pullman cuts into the conversation with Mrs Lonsdale with no pleasantries and leaves it by summarising the goodbyes. Summarising helps sustain that 'illusion of reality' because it allows the reader themselves to insert all the little things that make an exchange feel natural, and that's often more effective than us ever trying to spell it out. While this usually applies to small talk and pleasantries, it can apply to more important conversations as well.

Sometimes, you want small talk, though. It can serve a purpose. Perhaps two characters are refusing to talk about a growing issue between them, but they bump into each other accidentally. You purposefully lay out all the small talk because you want the reader to feel that awkward space between them. They might be speaking to each other, but they're not really saying anything. They're avoiding the problems simmering beneath the surface.

Summary

1. Action tags can replace dialogue tags, add more variety, indicate cadence, signify which lines are more important, and allow you to control the pacing of a scene, but too many can be clunky.
2. *Said* encompasses a lot of different ways of speaking, which is why using other words too much can sound melodramatic. Look out for placeholder tags like *replied* or those that indicate a line is more intense than it truly is. Sometimes action tags better accomplish the same thing.
3. Other tags can be a shorthand way of indicating intensity, cadence, or emotion when you don't want to spend too many words. Look for where a scene changes direction, when it shifts gear, the tension ramps up, or a dynamic changes. They can also give information that isn't immediately apparent in the dialogue itself.
4. Allowing each character to approach the same topic from a different angle with a different aspect to focus on helps develop their character voice. This infuses their dialogue with more character subtext. Think about the contrasting roles they might play in a scene.
5. Let characters talk, but don't let them become talking heads. Establishing objects, obstacles, and set pieces that play into the scene later helps ground your scene.
6. Contrast is just as important—not in every way, but in some. Think about your characters' speaking patterns, how they present information, word choice, expressions, the comparisons and metaphors they use, and how their dialogue looks on the page.

7. Not *every* piece of dialogue needs to sound like it could only come from one character, but every character needs *some* dialogue that only sounds like them.
8. Realistic dialogue is flexible in its syntax and grammar, especially in casual settings, and often has conversation threads moving a little out of step.
9. Summarising the more mundane aspects of a conversation and spelling out the key moments can create an illusion of realistic and dialogue and an important exchange without cluttering the page with uninteresting or unimportant speech.

SUBTEXT IN DIALOGUE

The Great Gatsby by F Scott Fitzgerald
Child 44 by Tom Rob Smith
Torchwood
'Wolverine Frogs' by Hannah Lee Kidder
A Game of Thrones by George RR Martin
Player of Games by Iain M Banks
Submergence by Arula Ratnakar

Once you have the basics down and your dialogue is reading smoothly, you want to make it deeper and more meaningful, and subtext is how you do that. It's the bread and butter of good writing. This chapter builds on our previous one on dialogue, but it can be read in isolation. In that chapter we discussed how focus and role imbue your dialogue with character subtext. In this chapter, we'll cover how to improve your dialogue with other types of subtext, how to incorporate them, the difficulties with thematic subtext, and some structural techniques.

What is subtext?

Some people will tell you—especially in screenwriting circles—that subtext is what people are *really* saying outside of their words, but that's only part of the truth. That's an example of subtext, but there are many other equally important types which play a much larger role in your story architecture. Subtext includes:

- Dynamics that characters may or may not be consciously aware of between themselves and others (such as the power imbalance between a sergeant and private).
- Themes such as symbols, motifs, meanings, or ideas which can be derived from the text even if the characters aren't aware of them.

- Character information which can be implicitly revealed as they speak.
- Hidden thoughts or emotions unintentionally revealed in how a character speaks.
- Implication when characters intentionally communicate or obfuscate something without outright stating it (like accusations, passive aggression, sugar-coating, euphemisms, and sarcasm).

Subtext is reading between the lines in all these ways and more. See if you can spot three types of subtext in this passage from F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.

> 'Who is this Gatsby anyhow?' demanded Tom suddenly. 'Some big bootlegger?'
>
> 'Where'd you hear that?" I inquired.
>
> 'I didn't hear it. I imagined it. A lot of these newly rich people are just big bootleggers, you know.'
>
> 'Not Gatsby,' I said shortly.
>
> He was silent for a moment. The pebbles of the drive crunched under his feet.
>
> 'Well, he certainly must have strained himself to get this menagerie together.'
>
> A breeze stirred the grey haze of Daisy's fur collar.
>
> 'At least they're more interesting than the people we know,' she said with an effort.
>
> 'You didn't look so interested.'
>
> 'Well, I was.'
>
> Tom laughed and turned to me.
>
> 'Did you notice Daisy's face when that girl asked her to put her under a cold shower?"
>
> 'Lots of people come who haven't been invited,' she said suddenly. 'That girl hadn't been invited. They simply force their way in and he's too polite to object.'
>
> 'I'd like to know who he is and what he does,' insisted Tom. 'And I think I'll make a point of finding out.'
>
> 'I can tell you right now,' she answered. 'He owned some drug stores, a lot of drug stores. He built them up himself.'

We can immediately see hidden thoughts and emotions in Daisy's insistence that Gatsby legitimately built up an empire of drugstores to dissuade Tom from looking too closely into Gatsby's affairs. Her quick defence of him is her trying to hide her feelings and past with Gatsby. Tom looking too deeply could threaten the comfortable life they've built together. There's tension bubbling under the surface.

We then see implication when Tom says, 'he certainly must have strained himself to get this menagerie together'. 'Menagerie' traditionally means an area for wild and strange zoo animals, but it can also mean a collection of oddities. It's a euphemism for saying the people at this party are beneath him, that they're uncivilised animals. Even the term 'strained' brings a negative connotation, as if these people were Gatsby's last options, assembled with desperation. It conjures the phrase 'scraping the bottom of the barrel.' Tom is looking down on these people. It's his Old Money snobbery talking without him actually saying what he means. Subtext can arise from double meanings.

Thirdly, there's some dynamic subtext to Nick and Gatsby's relationship. Nick is often an observer, a bystander in the events of the novel, but he immediately insists Gatsby isn't a bootlegger, even though he doesn't actually *know* that. This lets us in on Nick's bias towards the man, how he idealises him and wants to think the best of him, even if he's not conscious of that bias. It brings the truth of his account into question.

Other dialogue in *The Great Gatsby* is packed full of thematic ironic subtext.

> 'Don't believe everything you hear, Nick,' he advised me.
>
> I said lightly that I had heard nothing at all, and a few minutes later I got up to go home. They came to the door with me and stood side by side in a cheerful square of light. As I started my motor Daisy peremptorily called 'Wait!'
>
> 'I forgot to ask you something, and it's important. We heard you were engaged to a girl out West.'
>
> 'That's right,' corroborated Tom kindly. 'We heard that you were engaged.'
>
> 'It's libel. I'm too poor.'
>
> 'But we heard it,' insisted Daisy, surprising me by opening up again in a flower-like way. 'We heard it from three

people so it must be true.'

Here, Tom tells Nick not to 'believe everything you hear', only for Daisy to insist something must be true because she heard it from three people. All this plays into the constant dissonance between the public image people hold of you, the one you project, and what you are truly like—the American Dream being a public image you maintain, not acquire. The characters here are not consciously aware of the thematic discussions going on in their story, but Fitzgerald was, and he offers this subtext to the reader.

Thematic subtext is meaning your readers may derive from your story through its construction and design, and this is sometimes unintentional on the author's part. However, we rely on subtext to communicate our themes because stating them outright or having characters delve into explicit discussions about them can be jarring. It can fit in some genres or types of stories, but much of the meaning built into a story is like an iceberg: most of it is hidden beneath the surface.

When dialogue fails to hit the mark, it's often because it lacks these kinds of subtext where they're needed. Something got on my nerves as I read Tom Rob Smith's *Child 44,* and I couldn't pin down what it was until I realised the story, and especially the dialogue, lacked subtext. Readers expect subtext, so we are actively looking for what we're missing, what's being foreshadowed, and what's underneath what we're being told. Readers are actively engaged with deciphering the text, and it makes any reveals and developments much more compelling. It makes every line and scene multi-dimensional. It creates a sense that the story has depth you will often, but not always, grasp, enriching re-reading and reflection. Lacking subtext can mean characters, dynamics, or conflicts come across as shallow, undeveloped, or worse, boring.

Child 44 is about a Soviet-era MGB officer who gets disgraced and loses all power and privilege, and in that fallout, he has the following confrontation with his wife.

> 'I married you because I was scared, scared that if I rejected your advances I'd be arrested… I was young, Leo, and you were powerful…'
>
> The train pulled out. Leo watched it go, trying to digest what she'd said. But she gave him no pause, speaking as

> though these words had been forming in her head over many years. Now, tapped, they were flowing freely.
>
> ‘The problem with becoming powerless, as you are now, is that people start telling you the truth. You’re not used to it, you’ve lived in a world protected by the fear you inspire… Circumstance is the glue between us. I have you. You have me. We don’t have very much else…’
>
> Leo had no reply. He was unprepared, outgunned, outspoken. In the past he’d used his position to get better accommodation, better food. He hadn’t imagined he’d used it to get a wife too.

There are two problems here. First, what little subtext there is in this dialogue is immediately spelled out in the prose between. We’re explicitly told the dynamic of their relationship now, how she has kept in her emotions for so long and that they’re all spilling out, and even about the themes of the blindness of people in power. All this *could* have come through in the dialogue as subtext. The wife is almost too aware of the story she’s in. The lines about him becoming powerless ‘as you are now’ and how he’d used his position in the past to ‘get a wife’ awkwardly spells out what we should be recontextualising for ourselves. In a way, I just did not buy it. There’s a pattern to Smith’s writing. A character will say something, then Smith will give us a line that reframes it with the underlying meaning we’re meant to get from it. It happens twice in this example, and many more times across the novel.

Secondly, people don’t usually say ‘I’m sad’ or ‘I’m angry’. For the past seven years, I’ve worked at a self-harm and suicide youth helpline. I can tell you from experience that people tend to either liken their emotions to something else—‘It’s like I’m lost and don’t know where to go’—or they talk about what’s making them feel the way they do—‘There was this awful customer at work today’. Especially in emotionally intense states, people tend to hyperfixate and generalize. They might say, ‘This one thing frustrates the hell out of me’ even when a myriad of things is going wrong or ‘It’s all too much’ when just one thing pushed them over the edge. A child stuck in an abusive home will often talk more about their struggles at school, as those feel more manageable, even if the core issue belongs with their parents. In all cases, people rarely articulate their emotions or organise

their thoughts efficiently—which is what Smith does in this scene and throughout the rest of the book. While there are places for characters to explicitly state their emotions, I'm not convinced this was one of them.

Writing like this can feel like you're simply exploring a character's mindset, but sometimes, you're just stripping your dialogue of subtext and making it boring. I struggle with this as well. You're not so much reading between the lines at this point as just reading the lines.

One way I spot this in my writing is looking for lines summarising the feelings of a scene or following a piece of dialogue. A father might speak gently with his daughter, guiding her, and breathe a sigh of relief when she goes to bed. Then the scene might end with something like, 'she was his rock, his everything, and he would always protect her'. That information probably came across in the dialogue, and you're only bringing it out like this to ensure the reader doesn't miss it, but this is *telling,* not *showing*, and it's especially egregious because it's a kind of telling that is redundant since you already showed what the reader needed to know.

Consider letting characters articulate their emotions by likening them to something, hyperfixating, speaking broadly or distractedly, or redirecting to something other than the core issue, especially something more manageable. I've found trying to write the same thing in fewer words can be an easy shortcut. It forces me to strip away some of the context I might want to give but do not need and leave it to subtext.

Dialogue subtext can equally foreshadow a character's true emotions *before* they're able to fully articulate it themselves. *Looking for Alaska* does this often. Characters will hyperfixate on seemingly unrelated details, focusing on the wrong thing, with wording that channels anger and frustration only revealed later when they organise their thoughts and face the true source of their pain. They may not even *recognise* the true source at first, which is why they speak to the wrong things. When we're experiencing intense emotions, we might struggle to organise our thoughts, priorities, and feelings. This is an underrated way of exploring emotion in dialogue—the chaos of the human mind weaving in a dozen different directions before it finally gets a hold of itself and can see things a bit more clearly.

Some kinds of subtext are easier to incorporate

We've discussed five types of subtext: dynamics, thematic, character, hidden emotions, and implication. While the first three are harder to build into your dialogue, the last two fit right in with pre-existing character conflict.

I recently started watching *Torchwood* again—an adult science fiction show about a specialist team dealing with alien artefacts and their bisexuality. I was struck by how much subtext they built into their dialogue, incorporating character focus, roles, dynamics, implication, and hidden emotions at every turn. Take this moment where an alien has possessed a girl's body. Gwen feels like they're not doing enough to help. The writers *could* have given us the following:

> GWEN: What are we doing having Chinese while a girl fights for her life?
> JACK: What are we meant to do? Constantly worry? You're new here. You're too wrapped up in this. We can't lose sleep every time we think we could do a tiny bit more. Take a breath or it'll get annoying.

Now, it'd be fine if Jack said this. It's functional. It does the job. It gives us a little conflict between the pragmatist, Jack, and the heart of the group, Gwen. Instead, the writers had Jack say this:

> GWEN: What are we doing having Chinese while a girl fights for her life?
> JACK: Actually, while we've been eating, the computers have been running a full bio-scan on Carys, profiling her blood, metabolism, organs, skin, the works, so we can see what effect the alien's having on her. They've also been taking samples of the air in the cell so we can analyse any changes in the environment around her. Now, is that enough? Do you want more?

This line gives us two bits of vital subtext. Jack is implying, 'You're new here. You're too wrapped up in this,' but he softens it to be more diplomatic, and he hides his frustration behind passive aggression. He never says any of this; instead, he not only rattles off a long list of things they've done and asks if that is enough, when it clearly is, exposing her lack of expertise. She didn't know they were already doing this and should trust them more. The frustration isn't explicitly directed at her, but subtext exposes everything that matters. They're both concerned for the girl, but Jack's team has just learned to deal with the intensity of the job a bit better.

However, we often focus so much on implication and hidden emotions that we don't think about how to incorporate subtext into scenes without as much character conflict. It's easier to have characters implying things when they're pissed off or in love. So, let's examine how *Torchwood* introduces its characters with dialogue-rich subtext in its opening scene.

> JACK: There you go. I can taste it. Oestrogen. Definitely oestrogen. You take the Pill, flush it away. It enters the water cycle, feminises the fish. Goes all the way up into the sky, then falls all the way back down on to me. Contraceptives in the rain. Love this planet. Still, at least I won't get pregnant. Never doing that again. How's it going?
> SUZIE: Nothing yet. It's got to connect. I've just got to feel it.
> OWEN: Hurry up and feel it. I'm freezing my arse off here.
> SUZIE: I can't just flick a switch. It's more like access. It grants me access.
> OWEN: Whatever that means.
> SUZIE: It's like. Oh, oh, oh—
> JACK: Positions.
> OWEN: If I get punched again, I'm punching him right back.
> JACK: Just concentrate. Suzie.

The characters here are working to resurrect and interrogate a murder victim, but we get a lot more information from how that plays out. We get the group's dynamics with Jack as the leader, calling the shots. He's the first

to speak, telling others to get into position, and without any ‘yes sir’ or ‘no sir’. We know Owen is irritable, short with others, and dismissive of what he doesn’t understand from character subtext. Lastly, sexuality plays a huge part in the series thematically. *Torchwood* explores the shame we can feel in sexual exploration, how we define ourselves in relation to our sexuality, and the diversity of sexual expression. The writers could have started with:

> JACK: Alright, set up, we don’t have long. You got the glove? How long has she been dead? Oh, two hours. I’ll clear the police.

This is mostly the same information, but the writers delivered it in a way that developed the dynamics, themes, and characters—even without conflict.

Not only this, but characters will always have emotions lingering from past scenes, and not all emotions involve animosity. Characters might be curious, affectionate, proud, disheartened, or fearful, even if they’re on the same page as others. This can all come out in subtext. When you’re working with scenes with less conflict, exploring your dynamics, themes, and characters is often easier and just as compelling.

Specific techniques

While there are many variables in the best way to give your scenes subtext, there are a few effective and simple tools to keep in mind.

Contradictions between dialogue and body language are the easiest and most recognisable way to create subtext. It’s often our first exposure to the concept. Consider this piece from ‘Wolverine Frogs’ by Hannah Lee Kidder.

> She relaxes and pushes my bangs from my face. ‘What did he do?’
>
> ‘He didn’t do anything.’
>
> ‘Emma—’
>
> ‘I don’t know what happened.’ I stare at the rusted brown mixing with bright red on my fingertips.

Emma insists she does not know what happened, but the way she avoids her mother's gaze tells us she does. She's just not ready to talk about it. The body language gives a secondary meaning to the dialogue, recontextualising it before or after the fact. This crops up most commonly when characters are hiding how they're feeling, but I've found it useful in two other common contexts as well.

You can use this when you're foreshadowing a character's emotions before they come out in dialogue, even when the character themselves may not be aware of how they're truly feeling. Imagine an overworked mum furiously scrubbing dishes till a plate accidentally breaks. She might not *realise* how overworked and underappreciated she truly is, but she *feels* it. A character might clench their hands as they hype themselves up in their bedroom before they come out to their family. They tell themselves over and over they're not nervous, but we can see they are. There's a dissonance between their internal thoughts and what their body language reveals.

Instead of showing an outright contradiction, someone's body language might indicate a more or less intense version of what they're saying. They might admit something upsets them, but insist they are okay, while barely restrained tears or a sudden flush of redness might reveal they are sadder or angrier than they are saying.

Another technique to add subtext is to show a character speaking in a way that doesn't fit their usual speech patterns. This can reveal an underlying feeling, such as when Ned interrupts a peasant in *A Game of Thrones*.

> 'Tell the Hand what happened at Sherrer.'
> Joss nodded. 'If it please His Grace—'
> 'His Grace is hunting across the Blackwater,' Ned said.

Ned is not the sort of man to interrupt others, but he does here. Despite him merely informing someone that the King is out hunting, he's very clearly snapping. This shows us how uncomfortable Ned is with being addressed as 'His Grace', a term reserved for the monarch. This beat echoes sentiments we have seen him express in the past, including his reluctance to come down to King's Landing and his disdain for formal court politics. In that, it brings out his character as well. I once wrote a character who never raised her voice. She was naturally shy and timid, and when interrupted,

ceded the conversation. The one time she raises her voice in the story highlights how intensely she's feeling in that moment. Perhaps the most common example of this is when someone in a romance story gets flustered and stumbles over their words when they normally would not.

In our previous chapter on dialogue, we talked about how characters can play different roles in a conversation: the sceptic, the heart, the pragmatist, and so on. If a character suddenly approaches a discussion from a different angle, this can tell us a lot about how their character is changing.

Lastly, subtext can be explored through disproportionate responses, such as a character exploding in anger at an insignificant problem or being ecstatic over a small victory. The contradiction between the situation and their reaction can expose repressed emotions or foreshadow an eventual shift in the scene. We wonder why a character would respond to something the way they do. After all, our emotions are messy and indirect. Oftentimes, we express our pain and happiness in strange ways, it infecting all parts of our lives, even directing our emotions at those who don't deserve it. Consider this passage from Iain M Banks' *Player of Games*.

> 'Please; no "Your Highness" now. We're alone; there is no breach of protocol… You must be very proud of your Culture.'
>
> He pronounced the last word with a distaste Gurgeh might have found comical if it hadn't been so obviously sincere.
>
> 'Pride?' he said. 'I don't know. I didn't make it; I just happened to be born into it, I—'
>
> 'Don't be simple Gurgeh.'
>
> … 'I'm here to play the game, that's all.'
>
> 'That's all,' Nicosar repeated quietly.
>
> … 'But half the credit for this game is yours… more than half, because you set—'
>
> 'I don't want your praise!' Nicosar lashed out with one hand, striking Gurgeh across the mouth… 'You disgust me, Morat Gurgeh… Your blind, insipid morality can't even account for your own success here.'

Player of Games is about a famous 'game player' who travels to a strange and brutal world to watch and participate in a tournament to select

their leader. There are a few contradictions between body language and speech patterns in this scene, telling us something is going on, until the emperor explodes in rage at Gurgeh for complimenting him. He's not actually angry at Gurgeh's compliment. He's disgusted by Gurgeh's 'Culture' (the civilisation he comes from) and resents how well Gurgeh has done in the tournament. It's humiliating for him as the leader of his people. There's a secondary emotion guiding how the emperor is speaking, and his disproportionate response creates a dramatic beat which complicates the scene.

You may have noticed these techniques fit more easily into implication and hidden emotion than theme, dynamic, or character. Some screenwriting advice pushes people to manufacture conflict in every scene, to pack it full of intrigue wherever you can, but this doesn't always work for novel writing. Needless conflict can quickly turn into melodrama or filler. It's okay to have lower-key stories. There's a lot of power in subtext outside passive-aggressive implication and hidden emotion.

However, agendas are important in scene construction and are fundamental for imbuing subtext on a line-by-line level. Characters always *want* different things out of a scene, and that can be subtle or consequential —think about how Owen wanted out of the rain in that *Torchwood* scene. Instead of manufacturing conflict, a better way to create more subtext is often rewording and restructuring what you already have to emphasise dynamics, character, and themes. If you have interesting characters, then they'll be fun to watch, even if they're just conversing about everyday matters. This feeds directly into our discussion around role and focus in the previous chapter.

Thematic subtext

It's worth exploring thematic subtext a bit more. It's tricky to handle without becoming cartoonish or clumsy. We don't want our characters to feel like mouthpieces for the author even though they technically are, but hiding that is part of the illusion.

Arula Ratnakar's *Submergence* is about consciousness, personhood, and what it means to live a subjective existence, so it plays with a lot of heavy, complex themes. Most of the story is dialogue, pure and simple, making it a

great case study. When the characters speak, they're not speaking in ways that feel self-aware of the story they're in. They're not summarising lessons to be taken from the plot.

> Noor frowns. 'We can't continue doing this. P. meyeri is intelligent! A single sponge contains more synapses than we can even fully comprehend! We have to tell everyone.'
>
> They look at one another, before turning to her. One man sighs.
>
> 'Look—Noor—right? We . . . we already know about this. Someone discovered this before you. Actually . . . we've known about this almost since we discovered the sponge. In fact, it is a crucial part of how we treat the diseases.'

Ratnakar's characters are arguing and processing their own emotions, leaving the themes as subtext. Even if the ideas are central to the scene, they manifest as obstacles in the story. Themes are explored in how these obstacles are encountered, how they get complicated, who the story intends us to empathise with, the solutions offered, and the narrative consequences from them. No messaging is summarised for us. When characters speak, they don't talk in a clinical, abstract way like the author dictating the themes in a sermon to the reader, but in ways that limit a character's commentary on the subject to *their* experience and perspective. The primary thing connecting the reader to the story is the characters' emotional turmoil, their realisations, and their conflict and loss. The ideas are present but underlie to our engagement with the characters' experiences.

Some writers dissect their themes and create characters who reflect those viewpoints, using their journey and conflict to explore the ideas. Ultimately, you probably want to prioritize believable, relatable characters over the ideas they represent, so make sure to build them out around these perspectives so they don't feel one-dimensional, but envisioning your characters inside the thematic web, where they sit and what complications they bring to the table can be a really effective way of incorporating theme. Doing this too obviously might make your story feel like a morality tale. Readers are pretty smart and will pick up on themes if you let them. You don't need to spell it out, and some readers might take affront to feeling like they're being preached to, especially if you haven't earned the pontification. Writers like Cixin Liu, Dostoevsky, and Fonda Lee *do* pontificate from time

to time, but only after earning our trust. Many readers are happy even if they don't get all the themes—they might just be along for the ride, and that's okay.

Remember that passage from *Child 44* about how power blinds you to the truth? It sounded strange because the character had never really spoken like that before. Thematic dialogue often becomes very heady, using words or expressions that don't sound like the characters, with their ambit for discussion suddenly much wider than their experiences in the story may necessarily warrant. This is especially because the emotions *driving* a scene may dissipate as you go deeper into a thematic discussion. Look out for your characters changing speech patterns to fit your themes.

Summary

1. Subtext isn't just implication or hidden emotion. It involves the dynamics between characters, themes, character traits, and foreshadowing.
2. Subtext gets the reader to actively engage with a text because they're looking for what they're missing, hidden meanings, and depth. Without it, writing can appear shallow.
3. People communicate feelings by likening them to other things, describing the immediate event that sparked the emotions, hyperfixating or generalising, or reacting physically before they can organise their thoughts.
4. Don't accidentally spell out your subtext under the guise of going through character thoughts.
5. Hidden emotions and implication are easy to incorporate into scenes of conflict, but dynamics, themes, and character can easily enrich scenes with less conflict.
6. Consider using contradictions between dialogue and body language, revealing body language, changing speech patterns or tone, and disproportionate responses.
7. Thematic subtext is hard to incorporate and risks becoming heavy-handed. Look out for dialogue that goes beyond how a character would normally speak.

DARKEST HOURS

Blade Runner: 2049
The Dark Knight
The Two Towers by JRR Tolkien
WALL-E
The Stormlight Archives by Brandon Sanderson
Avengers: Age of Ultron
'Waters of Mars' by Russell T Davies and Phil Ford
Avatar: The Last Airbender
Piranesi by Susanna Clarke
Flowers for Algernon by Daniel Keyes
Beartown by Fredrik Backman

The darkest hour or 'black moment' is a critical point in your story, usually around the end of the second act but before the decisive thrust of the third, where your characters are brought to their lowest point. *Blade Runner 2049* features one of my favourite examples of a darkest hour. K's ally, Deckard, has been captured, his lover, Joi, has been murdered in front of him, and he has just realised he is not the born replicant he thought he was, a prospect which has motivated him throughout the film thus far. The foundation for his character growth comes apart and we are given that iconic scene of him on the bridge, facing up against the giant holographic Joi. All is lost. The last piece of cake has been eaten and the cake was a lie anyway. He might as well give up.

On some level, we all intuitively understand how successes in a story are made more meaningful by the failures and low points that preceded them, and the darkest hour is perhaps the most important example of this structurally and narratively. Getting it right is fundamental, and this chapter will talk about how to do just that.

Making success meaningful

Failures, setbacks, and obstacles give the eventual success narrative weight by depriving the reader of catharsis for a time and showing them why the success matters. This can include character failure, where your characters give in to their worst impulses and definitively turn away from the growth they've had, as K does in *Blade Runner 2049*. There is also plot failure, where the stakes are lost or the villains have even supposedly won, like K losing Deckard to the Tyrell Corporation.

The most effective darkest hours combine both character and plot failures, showing us what it means to fail personally and narratively, giving character context to the stakes we can empathise with on the most visceral level possible. It's a powerful moment because we only see how much a character has to lose after a story full of growth and progress. Characters can fail in their psychological or moral struggles, they can lose a person, thing, or place they have tried to protect throughout the story, a set of circumstances they have maintained might fall apart, or something they have tried to prevent might finally happen. It can involve a fundamental shift in the stakes, often with thematic resonance.

Because of all this, the darkest hour is usually mirrored in some way by a decision in the climax. The character rises from the ashes and becomes something more, and we witness them shedding their skin. In *The Dark Knight*, Batman's darkest hour comes when he is duped by the Joker, loses Rachel, and realises he cannot beat this man while sticking to his morals. Throughout the film, Batman repeatedly resists killing and using other questionable tactics, but in his darkest hour, he gives in and sets up a city-wide surveillance system to track down the Joker—something his friend describes as a power no man should have. Despite this moral erosion, during the climax of the story, Batman refuses to cross his line to kill the Joker. He doesn't give in even though we saw how close he came. The darkest hour is juxtaposed against the climactic decision, making both beats stand out, the former giving the latter tension and meaning. In *Blade Runner 2049*, K's decision to fight on finds meaning in how he initially gave in to believing he was worthless and soulless. It's him rejecting that worldview, asserting himself and his humanity.

Stories are filled with setbacks and failures, big and small. In a way, conflict is what makes a story. What makes the darkest hour different? Even if characters make mistakes or fail throughout the story, there's usually a glimmer of hope, a reliable friendship powerup, or at least nothing calls into question whether they should fight on at all. The darkest hour juxtaposes all this with a moment that overshadows the hope, breaks up the friendship, or casts doubt on the outcome of the struggle.

One way to set this up is with scene structure.

After a setback, there is usually what's called a 'reactive scene'. It features a reaction, a dilemma, and a decision. These can be just a few lines or pages upon pages. Let's take a look at the 'Breaking of the Fellowship' in *The Two Towers*. Boromir attacks Frodo and is eventually killed by Uruk-hai whilst defending Merry and Pippin. The reaction scene shows the heartbreak and solemn goodbye as Boromir dies. Then, in the dilemma, Merry and Pippin have been taken by the Uruk-hai in one direction while Frodo and Sam have taken the Ring in another. Gimli, Legolas, and Aragorn aren't sure who to pursue. Though difficult, they make a decision to follow Merry and Pippin and hope is rekindled. In a parallel dilemma, Frodo grapples with the possibility the Ring may never be safe around others and is forced to decide between letting it infect his friends again or carrying the burden alone, so he decides to go his own way. However, none of the characters consider giving up on the quest entirely.

This pattern appears over and over. It may take time for the characters to process their reaction, they may agonise over the dilemma, but generally characters find a new direction to press on. These scenes give weight to the conflict on a scene-by-scene level, move the narrative forward, and complicate the tension. However, in the darkest hour, the characters will get stuck on one or more of these beats.

In *Blade Runner 2049,* when K reaches his lowest point, he gets stuck in his reaction. He has lost everything and learned he is not who he thought he was, so why fight on at all? He is faced with a dilemma: help Deckard and probably die or give in and live alone. Broken inside, snagging on this dilemma, the pain is too much, and he makes the wrong decision. He turns away at first. Deckard is left to be interrogated and tortured. The plot, in a sense, is brought to a grinding halt. There is no momentum in his decision making. There is no pressure to act imposed on him by the plot. K is left

where he is. He retreats into himself, to a new, miserable normal. There is only regression.

I have a weakness for literary symmetry. In *WALL-E,* WALL-E dies in the darkest hour and EVE is left desperately trying to restore him with relics of his old, curious life on Earth. It doesn't work. However, this moment is made so much harder by what happens when WALL-E resets and boots up again. At the beginning of the film, WALL-E had this little grasshopper who joined him on his adventures. He went out of his way to keep the little creature safe, avoiding running him over. But after being reset, WALL-E drives right over the little grasshopper—a symbol of his humanity and love for the natural world. The parts we loved in him are gone. This symmetry gives us a reference point: the thing we loved becomes the thing destroyed. This moment is unlike any other setback in the story because there's a sense of permanence and irreversibility to it. EVE herself gives up, as well. The symmetry allows to see how far they have come as well as how far they have now fallen. What kind of symmetry could you use to drive the permanence and darkness home?

Darkest hours aren't just meaningful because they're sad. They allow us to examine what these characters are like at their lowest points, force them to grapple with who they are on a fundamental level, and strip back the apparatus of plot and circumstance to get right down to the brass tacks in a way other setbacks and failures never really manage to get to. They also expose characters' deepest weaknesses and insecurities, show us the consequences of those things, and force a reckoning with them. They may force a character to act in a way they never have before. These dark moments narrow in on something the characters depend on emotionally and psychologically and take it away. We see them without what they have relied on, and they need to reconfigure themselves—but into what? The darkest hour leaves no excuses nor plot conveniences or simple decisions that once made it easier to move on. Maybe the characters always fight on because they refuse to believe there's no hope—until there isn't. Their desire for vengeance drives them forward every time, no matter how badly they're beaten—until that desire gets their family killed. Their optimism means they never give in—until they realise that optimism is based on a lie.

The darkest hour can even be drawn out for a significant time to show us a world where the characters *don't* overcome their challenges, where they don't deal with these emotions, where they run away from the dilemma, and

where they make the wrong decision. It can be multiple scenes. Say what you will about the Marvel Cinematic Universe, but *Avengers: Endgame* spent virtually half a film in the darkest hour following the losses of *Avengers: Infinity War.* Thanos won, and there was no recourse.

But it's not over, is it?

Characters almost always emerge from these darkest hours and are thrust into the third act. K decides to rescue Deckard, WALL-E is revived and goes back to save the ship, and Batman goes on to track down the Joker. This isn't always the case. The cyberpunk genre often finds our characters trapped in their darkest moment at the end of the story for effect—the pessimism is the point as a cautionary tale. However, the vast majority of stories see our characters emerge anew. The question is: How?

Taking something a character is emotionally dependent on away from them—a belief, a thing, or a person—forces them to find a new way to move on, a new psychological architecture through which to see the world and themselves. This usually comes from what they've learned throughout the story; it is the culmination of all that has come before. Oftentimes, there's some kind of external force that comes into their lives and forces them to recontextualise their reaction, re-engage with the dilemma, and reconsider their decision. It'll often be something that elicits an emotional change, harking back to something personal and reminding them of the bigger picture, allowing them to see past their despair or anger. In *Blade Runner 2049*, a holographic Joi calls K 'Joe'—the name his own Joi gave him earlier in the film. The name symbolised not only his growing sense of identity and authenticity but it was a point of connection between them. K at this point has realised he is *not* the born replicant he thought he was, that Joi encouraged him to believe. Yet, it's here that K realises whether he was 'born of a woman' or made in a factory doesn't actually matter. It doesn't make him, or the love he shared with Joi, less authentic.

Sometimes, that external force can be a person. In Brandon Sanderson's *The Stormlight Archives,* the guardian-angel-esque character Syl comes to Kaladin in his darkest, most suicidal moment.

In a way, the darkest hour places two reactive scenes next to each other. There is a reaction, a dilemma, the wrong decision, then rethinking that

reaction, another dilemma, and making the right decision. This sort of double structure can be very powerful but isn't used often because it can bring the story to a halt and relies on us caring about that wrong decision. It's also a way to retroactively make moments in your story earlier more meaningful—like Joi calling K 'Joe' or WALL-E running over the grasshopper. In this way, these moments aren't just heartbreaking before a glimmer of hope. They use imagery, symbolism, and symmetry to return to story beats from before to deepen the despair and intensify the hope. They are often the peak, culmination, or revelatory moment in which these narrative strands finally come together to make their point. Darkest hours can reinforce the deeper thread of narrative continuity and payoff in a way other setbacks don't really get to. In the darkest hour, authors play the hand they have been building since the start of the book.

One thing that weakens your darkest hour

Avengers: Age of Ultron is an okay film, but its climax is a little weak. Our characters have either their arcs by the midpoint of the film, as with Wanda, or their darkest hours are relatively disconnected from their primary arcs, as with Tony and Steve. The only character whose arc rises out of the darkest hour and resolves during the climax is Quicksilver, who's about as interesting as white bread. There's fighting in the climax but it's not precisely clear what that fighting means personally—especially because the decision to keep on fighting doesn't come out of resolving any personal issues. Instead, things are sad, and then they decide to fight. There's a low point, but without much resonance either backwards or forwards through the narrative.

All too often, authors use the darkest hour to resolve everything in a character, meaning the third act becomes entirely plot tension. This isn't inherently bad—we see it a lot—but given we get most of our attachment from characters, relying purely on plot tension can fall a bit flat. We want to feel like our characters still have a way to go, to evolve, and that their personal decisions will complicate the plot going forward. We don't get this in *Avengers: Age of Ultron.*

Consider having your characters exit their darkest hour with some uncertainty and a promise of growth. They haven't proved something to themselves or others, but they're willing to try, and that ultimate test comes in the climax. Batman crosses a line to find the Joker, but it's still up in the air as to whether he will cross the final line: will he kill the Joker? Can the Joker break anybody, even Batman? Could anyone become like him?

Don't worry about it too much

With all this focus on symmetry, arcs, and scene structure, it's easy to get caught up in thinking there is a 'right' or 'wrong' way to do this and you must not deviate. That's just not true. These 'rules' are more guidelines, and anyone who tells you otherwise is either lying or trying to sell you something. For every common bit of writing advice, there are a hundred stories which fly in the face of it and are still deeply compelling. There are a million ways to write effective darkest hours.

In negative or very dark arcs, it can be powerful to have a character give up on their personal growth but *not* the plot tension—deciding to pursue the antagonist in immoral ways, giving into their worst instincts, and thrusting them into the third act with a much darker tone. In 'Waters of Mars', an episode of *Doctor Who,* the Doctor finds himself amongst a crew of scientists he knows are about to die. He can't interfere to save them because the laws of time say this tragic event needs to happen. He spends the episode getting to know them and wishing he could help, even walking away to allow them to die, till the darkest hour rolls around. The Doctor abandons his moral code to not interfere, triggering the third act, where he saves these people who need to die and proclaims, 'The laws of time are mine and they will obey *me*!' He doesn't reconsider this decision until *after* the climax. This is a negative arc which takes him to his lowest point. The consequences play out and end on a sombre note: he's lived too long, grown too powerful and inhuman, and is running from death.

Other times, the darkest hour doesn't come until what feels like the middle of the climax. These are the moments where the battle goes into slow motion, we see all our red-shirt allies dying left, right, and centre, and our heroes are suddenly on the back foot. The action-reaction scene structure is often entirely out of order, jumbled, with beats jumping between

decision and conflict and dilemma and another dilemma and then reconsidering their reaction and who knows what else.

Stories with multiple points of view or tangling timelines regularly don't line up their darkest hours. When is Zuko's in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*? It's not during the climax when Aang has his. In fact, it's after he sides with Azula, when Iroh is gone, and he has everything he thought he wanted—but he's miserable. We see that double reaction beat, where he makes the wrong decision and sides with the villains whilst giving in to his deepest insecurities before he slowly reconsiders his reaction, works through a dilemma, and makes a new decision: to join the Avatar. Not only is this several episodes before the finale, but his darkest hour takes eleven episodes. It's a whole story in and of itself. These structures are completely malleable to whatever ends your story might need.

Darkest hour tragedies don't fit some stories. Its purpose is to heighten that feeling of success in the third act and give our characters something to emerge from, but not every story needs that. *Piranesi* by Susanna Clarke has a climax, but it's not a triumphant 'we won' moment. It's a character deciding who they are in a low-key way. The whole book is subtle, thematic, and contemplative, so the darkest hour is likewise mild.

Flowers for Algernon by Daniel Keyes is a heart-wrenching story about a mentally challenged man who undergoes a special surgery to improve his brain function. He temporarily becomes a genius but slowly regresses back to his original mental state. There's not quite a darkest hour in the way we usually conceive them here. The impact of the story comes through in the slow breakdown of his mind. While there's a point he feels alone and hopeless, forcing the story to fit a reaction-scene structure just wouldn't work the way it does in other stories.

Don't force your story to fit these structures; use this structure to understand your story and where it could improve.

Mental illness

Analysis of depression, suicide, self-harm, or other mental struggles has become increasingly common in modern stories. I feature it a lot in my own writing. These are powerful, visceral, and complex struggles to put your characters through, but they run into what I've called the 'Good Story

Problem', especially in the context of a darkest hour beat. This is the idea that the structures, tropes, or stories a lot of people enjoy don't necessarily reflect the realities of what we are describing. A lot of the time that doesn't matter, but it does when it comes to things like mental illness.

Darkest hours are meant to be the lowest point for your characters, usually right before they 'win'. However, in reality, the depths of one's worst depression or suicidal episodes don't always come near the end of their story and certainly don't stop with an epiphany about the power of friendship or love. It's much more likely to be somewhere in the middle of one's struggles. People overcome these challenges with the help of professionals, medication, and new support systems because the road to healing is long, winding, and sometimes feels like going in circles. It can be full of relapses, and sometimes one never 'wins' against the thoughts. These struggles don't follow a neat narrative structure.

This is something Fredrik Backman handles fantastically in *Beartown*. A main character is traumatised, and we see her depression develop across the story until she reaches her darkest hour. She's torn between killing herself and killing someone else, it seems—we're not sure which, but she's in an incredibly dark place, nonetheless. While she emerges from this, it's not a glorious triumph where everything is better, but an understated new equilibrium where she feels a little safer and more in control. Backman placed her on the road to healing but showed us there was a long way to go yet. This is something I try to do in my own writing. Characters don't necessarily end up better, but they may choose to open up about their issues for the first time. They seek help. They confront memories or experiences they refused to before. That is a victory in itself.

Summary

1. Failures make success meaningful, and the darkest hour is perhaps the best moment to demonstrate that.
2. Setbacks throughout the story usually put your characters through a reaction, dilemma, and decision as they find a new way forward. Darkest hours see the character trapped in the reaction, making the wrong decision, or giving up entirely before going back to reconsider.

3. Darkest hours allow you to explore a character at their lowest point, in their darkest inclinations, through their worst fears realised. It often helps to take away something the characters depend on psychologically or emotionally and force them to find a new way to look at themselves or the world.
4. Darkest hours convince us of what is at stake: character struggles with morality or ideology, danger to places or people they've tried to protect, a set of circumstances they've tried to preserve, or something they wish to prevent.
5. Literary symmetry is a great tool for creating despair and hope, making features of the story retroactively more meaningful, and creating a deeper sense of narrative continuity.
6. Some stories don't fit the typical darkest hour structure, and that's okay. Don't force your story to fit; use this information look at what might help your story.
7. Mental illness doesn't fit the typical darkest hour structure. Rather than having characters emerge from their lowest point completely healed, allow them to end up on the long, winding road to healing.

SHOW, DON'T TELL

The Ocean at the End of the Lane by Neil Gaiman
The Testaments by Margaret Atwood
All Quiet on the Western Front by Enrique Maria Remarque
Misery by Stephen King
The Northern Lights by Philip Pullman
Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Patterson
'The Paper Menagerie' by Ken Liu
Drive My Car by Haruki Murakami
Beartown by Fredrik Backman
'Waiting for Daddy' by Hilma Wolitzer
Fifty Shades of Grey by EL James
Three Kinds of Silence by Timothy Hickson
Bojack Horseman
'Wolverine Frogs' by Hannah Lee Kidder
House of Leaves by Mark Z Danielewski
Turtles All the Way Down by John Green

'Show, don't tell' is the ungodly hammer with which all new writers are repeatedly bludgeoned, but here's the thing: it's not true. At least, not all the time, and learning how and when to tell is just as important as learning how and when to show. This is a massive topic. In a way, it covers all of writing, so in this chapter, we're going to narrow in on one specific part of it: telling and showing character emotions, and in particular, two big mistakes writers make.

Tell, don't show

It's easy to fall into thinking there's an emotion iceberg: there's telling at the top ('she felt happy with herself'), then physicalising a little beneath that ('she clenched her fists'), then describing the feeling in the abstract, character action, and introspection beneath that. There is a sense we always want to be as deep in this iceberg as possible—but this isn't always the case. If every emotion your characters felt came out in elaborate paragraphs

of prose, it would not only grind the pace of any scene to a halt, but it risks coming across as disproportionately melodramatic. Every little feeling is made into a monumental scene. There is a place for telling. Characters feel things all the time in tiny, passing, insignificant ways that still make up the tapestry of their experience. Consider this excerpt from Neil Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane.*

> The pond is next, I thought. I just have to go around this shed, and I'll see it. I saw it and felt oddly proud of myself, as if that one act of memory had blown away some of the cobwebs of the day.

Here, a character feels pride in recalling something from their childhood after being away for so long. There is just a dash of it, a little sprinkling, and it's not a big emotion to dwell on, so Gaiman just tells us and hides it in amongst some other interesting language which fits the wider scene of someone rediscovering their childhood home. Telling in small moments, in the transitions between scenes, is completely appropriate.

On some level, all writing is telling, just in more or less elaborate ways. We're learning to disguise that. If you want to keep the pace up, telling can be more efficient. It can sometimes simply flow better. We criticise telling because it's less immersive and dictates our experience of the story, telling us how we're meant to feel rather than inviting us to piece it together, but there are many ways to immerse people in a story, a character's journey, or a world. If you're immersive in some ways, you can be less immersive in others and get away with it. It's about balance and knowing where to put your time, wordcount, and energy.

Even so, showing is important, and that really begins with something called specificity.

Specificity

Emotions are so much more than anger, sadness, happiness, and so on. You can have a sadness that hits you for a moment or a sadness that's the first thing you feel when you wake up in the morning before you're even quite conscious, before you even remember what you are sad about. All

these emotions are on a spectrum which stretch a thousand ways and can take a hundred forms. Consider the highly specific kind of emotion Margaret Atwood captures here in *The Testaments*.

> I feared I might lose my faith. If you've never had a faith, you will not understand what that means. You feel as if your best friend is dying; that everything that defined you is being burned away; that you'll be left all alone. You feel exiled, as if you are lost in a dark wood. It was like the feeling I'd had when Tabitha died: the world was emptying itself of meaning. Everything was hollow. Everything was withering.

Atwood is describing sadness in the abstract following the loss of a girl's religion, but it's so much more than that. The introspection is layered with loss of identity, direction, and depersonalisation. She isn't just showing us sadness, but a specific kind of long-lasting and deeply rooted pain which leaves one questioning who they are in the wake of this. Her specificity creates a unique, immersive, and lived experience where simply saying 'her sadness was an abyss' would not. Explore the curves and accents of your emotion.

Look at Atwood's word choice in this passage, as well. It's specific, evocative, and has multiple layers. Atwood could have written, 'it's like everything that defined you is dying', but she chose the words 'burned away'. This is more active, giving the impression something or someone is doing the burning *to* her and that she doesn't want it to happen. 'Dying' isn't always painful, and it can be a passive experience. 'Burning' is painful. It's reducing something to nothing, making it unrecognisable. Then, she uses phrases like 'the world emptying itself of meaning', 'hollow', and 'withering'. These are powerful words which carry a lot more than simply saying she felt 'empty', which is often overused anyway. 'Withering', in particular, creates a sense of change and decay.

When describing these emotional reactions, be careful with clichés. They lose effect on readers and we glance over them because they don't carry the weight they might have once before. There are exceptions to this. In Enrique Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front,* a traumatised World War I German soldier describes reading a letter from a soldier he was forced to kill.

> There are portraits of a woman and a little girl, small amateur photographs taken against an ivy- clad wall. Along with them are letters. I take them out and try to read them. Most of it I do not understand, it is so hard to decipher and I scarcely know any French. But each word I translate pierces me like a shot in the chest;--like a stab in the chest.

'Like a stab in the chest' is a cliché, but this passage really captures Paul's horror, guilt, and sadness with language which naturally arises from war. Even more so, correcting it to a stab rather than a bullet makes this pain more personal. A bullet is inherently impersonal because it places distance between the killer and the killed, and this scene is about him realising this man was a real person with a real life, as real as he is. A stab brings out that intimacy, especially because Paul killed Gérard Duval by stabbing him in hand-to-hand combat. There's a symmetry to the language which makes the cliché fit. It's even profound in how well it fits the moment and mirrors the event that preceded it.

Other times, how you describe emotions depends on personal style. Hemingway takes to simpler word choices than Jorge Luis Borges. Stylistic considerations can be especially meaningful in a first person narrative, where word choice often comes less from the author and more from the words the perspective character would use.

Also, watch out for words like 'very' or 'extremely' when capturing emotion. They're an inefficient way to intensify an adjective. Stephen King hates adverbs for a similar reason. They often indicate you're not being specific enough with your words because they're not capturing the intensity or scale you intend. Readers get little more out of being told a character is 'very afraid' versus 'afraid'. I went through Stephen King's *Misery* to see if he lived up to his own advice, and true enough, he only uses these terms ten times outside of dialogue. Instead of 'very afraid, try 'terrified', and instead of 'very tired', try 'exhausted'.

Filter words are another common pitfall. Words like felt, saw, realised, and knew all create psychological distance between the reader and character, reminding us we're reading a story. 'A shadow loomed in the dark alley' is much more immersive than 'He saw a shadow looming in the dark alley'. It closes any psychological gap. If specificity is about bringing

you closer to the exact emotion of a character, then cutting filter words is an easy way to do it.

Show, don't tell

Take a look at this passage from Philip Pullman's *The Northern Lights*.

> Lyra clenched herself, but relaxed almost at once as Pantalaimon thought to her: We're only safe as long as we pretend. She opened her eyes and found that they'd been containing tears, and to her surprise and shame she sobbed and sobbed.

Pullman could have told us Lyra was anxious and afraid, but he didn't. Instead, he showed us by physicalising: Lyra clenched herself, she shut her eyes, and she sobbed and sobbed. He showed us how these emotions come out in her bodily experience. Physicalising brings these emotions to life in a scene, making this the go-to example for showing rather than telling. It's a pretty easy way to improve your writing because it's intuitive and doesn't take up much space on the page. However, physicalising too much can grind your scene to a halt by forcing the reader to stay in that moment longer than necessary. It can come across as melodramatic if you're physicalising insignificant emotions. Not everything we feel or say needs to come with physical movements or reactions. This is why character action can sometimes be a better way to display your character's emotions.

> *Leslie-dead-girl-friend-rope-broke-fell-you-you-you.* The words exploded in his head like corn against the sides of the popper. *God-dead-you-Leslie-dead-you.* He ran until he was stumbling but he kept on, afraid to stop. Knowing somehow that running was the only thing that could keep Leslie from being dead. It was up to him. He had to keep going.
>
> … He tried to run faster, but his father passed him and stopped the pickup just ahead, then jumped out and ran back. He picked Jess up in his arms as though he were a baby. For the first few seconds Jess kicked and struggled

> against the strong arms. Then Jess gave himself over to the numbness that was buzzing to be let out from a corner of his brain.
>
> … He leaned his weight upon the door of the pickup and let his head thud-thud against the window… When they pulled up at his house, his father sat quietly, and Jess could feel the man's uncertainty, so he opened the door and got out, and with the numbness flooding through him, went in and lay down on his bed.

This is Katherine Patterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*, a book which defined my childhood and that I continually return to. In this scene, Jess is overcome with heartbreak and pain when he learns his friend, Leslie, has died. We get a little of Patterson describing feelings in the abstract like Atwood does with the 'numbness flooding through him', as well as some physicalising with how he 'let his head *thud-thud* against the window'. Unlike in *The Testaments* or *The Northern Lights,* however, we also see him actively making decisions in the scene which reflect his emotions: he runs until he stumbles, refusing to stop, and fights against his father. Patterson shows us his frantic panic, fear, denial, and giving up, all while his actions simultaneously move the scene forward. Jess is brought into conflict with his father. He runs away from home. We're never hemmed into a single moment because Jess is pulling the story this way and that.

This is something to keep in mind for fast-paced scenes where stopping to describe feelings in the abstract or how their eyes twitch or hands shake too much might undermine the tension and momentum. Character action has two purposes here: it allows a character to shape the direction of a scene and thus keep up the pace, but it can also mark a shift in pace after a slower, emotional beat.

Show narrative consequences to big emotions

Emotions are only as intense as they motivate us to do things. We can physicalise or internalise as much as we like, but unless they force us to

take a course of action, how important can they truly be? This is partly why character action is so important. Jess' actions force his father to come and get him, to even wrestle him to the ground. It forces reactions from other characters and shapes the plot and the obstacles characters face.

This can be on a scene-by-scene or wider structural level. A character might suddenly burst out in anger or throw a punch in an argument, ramping up the tension and moving the scene forward. Alternatively, following the argument, they might take the other person to court, sparking the next scene and perhaps the plot of the rest of the story. This is like a litmus test you can put your own story through: can you identify how the emotions of your characters at the end of each scene feed into the next one? Feelings lead to actions, which lead to feelings, which lead to actions… until those feelings are resolved or the character reaches a feeling they're satisfied staying with.

The bottom line is to focus on describing symptoms of the emotion, not the emotion itself. Atwood's burning, Lyra's clenching, and Jess' running away are all the indirect psychological and physical symptoms of the emotions the authors are trying to capture. They are how sadness, anger, or love manifest without saying those words. Keep in mind the best books use a variety of techniques and don't rely on one way to express feelings.

Whether you're thinking about specificity, physicalising, or character action, it's important to convey what's *special* about your character's reaction. What makes what they're feeling interesting? Narrowing in on that can make for a more immersive beat. Of course, there are lots of emotional expressions we all have in common with one another, but how we express emotion is a fundamental part of who we are—our love language, how often we cry, or how we suppress our emotions. In this way, you're not just capturing emotion in the abstract as accurately as you can. You're capturing character and want to consider what you want the reader to take away about them from the scene.

The big mistake writers make

I discovered a peculiar thing when researching for this chapter: most of the superb emotional writing I came across didn't come from telling, physicalising, or even character action. It was expressed in a much more

nebulous way. It's easy to fall into a pattern: you describe the setting, describe the conflict there, then describe the emotions coming out of that conflict. Rinse and repeat. It's an easy formula, and it's even implied in the common action-reaction scene structure. We're often taught this way to write, in a sense. However, I want to challenge you to use emotions more complexly. 'The Paper Menagerie' is a beautiful magical realist story about a Chinese American kid who grows up to resent his Chinese heritage and mother, and part of why it works so well is how Ken Liu incorporates emotion into every part of the story:

> If my Mom spoke to me in Chinese, I refused to answer her. After a while, she tried to use more English. But her accent and broken sentences embarrassed me. I tried to correct her. Eventually, she stopped speaking altogether if I was around.
>
> Mom began to mime things if she needed to let me know something. She tried to hug me the way she saw American mothers did on TV. I thought her movements exaggerated, uncertain, ridiculous, graceless. She saw that I was annoyed, and stopped.
>
> … Every once in a while, I would see her at the kitchen table studying the plain side of a sheet of wrapping paper. Later a new paper animal would appear on my nightstand and try to cuddle up to me. I caught them, squeezed them until the air went out of them, and then stuffed them away in the box in the attic.

Emotions in Ken Liu's writing aren't just things experienced inside scenes after a lot of buildup but are used as the connective tissue between scenes. Liu doesn't describe the embarrassment in abstract terms or body language; he moves the plot forward by describing a chain of emotional decisions: correcting her, getting annoyed with her hugs, strangling her origami pieces. These slowly escalate and build on one another in this transitional passage to set up the next scene where his mother dies and leaves him a letter in Chinese which he cannot even read because he refused to learn the language. This is just one creative way to capture emotion.

Most writers do not need to get better at describing emotion—they need to get better at introspection. This is what your character thinks, how they

interpret the world, and how they interpret their own emotions. On a fundamental level, *these* are what a character is feeling. A character isn't just thinking 'I'm afraid'; they're afraid of how they're going to afford groceries next week, or their mother's cancer treatment, or whether they'll have enough spare change to get a coffee in the morning. There are real, tangible manifestations to every emotion and exploring those in your introspection matters a lot more. This is where so much emotion comes through, and it's also a constant in every part of your scene. Haruki Murakami nails his introspection every time in 'Drive My Car'.

> They shook hands goodbye. Takatsuki's hand was soft, with long slender fingers. His palm was warm and slightly damp, as if he had been sweating. Perhaps he was nervous.
>
> After he left, Kafuku sat down on a chair in the green room, opened his right hand, and stared at his palm. The sensation left by the handshake was still fresh. That hand, those fingers, had caressed his wife's naked body. Slowly and deliberately, exploring every nook and cranny. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. What in heaven's name was she trying to do? He felt that whatever 'it' was, he had no choice but to go ahead and do it.

'Drive My Car' is about a man meeting the guy his dead wife slept with and trying to figure out just what this man had that he didn't. There are complex emotions at play here: resentment, pain, loss, and self-blame. But instead of physicalising or telling, Murakami captures all this through this introspection layered with emotional subtext. Introspective emotion really comes out in what a character focuses on.

Murakami doesn't write about how 'he had never been so jealous', but about the feel of this man's hand his wife would have once felt. He does not describe the bar, or the man's eyes, or his hair, but his hand—the object of physical touch. Sex is a physical and intimate act, and this is almost a way of getting closer to understanding, to mimicking their relationship in some small way. All of this reveals how the man feels without ever stating it.

However, your focus applies *everywhere* in your writing, not just your characters' introspective thoughts. Readers will interpret and feel differently about something depending on what you focus on in describing a setting, a person, an event, or a conflict. If your character finds themselves in a dark

forest, do you describe the shadows or the pretty mushrooms? Both might be true, but each of these have emotional and atmospheric connotations. Take a look at how Beartown is described in Fredrik Backman's *Beartown*.

> Maya wakes up and stays in bed, playing her guitar. The walls of her room are covered in a mixture of pencil drawings and tickets she's saved from concerts she's been to in cities far from here... Beartown isn't close to anything. [It's,] 'As if nature and man were fighting a tug-of-war for space,' more high-minded souls might suggest. Either way, the town is losing. It has been a very long time since it won at anything. More jobs disappear each year, and with them the people, and the forest devours one or two more abandoned houses each season.

This is not stream of consciousness writing like in *The Paper Menagerie* or *Drive My Car*. It's describing a room and a town, but the focus on her posters from the outside world tell us a lot about this girl's emotional state. The town is losing, and she wants out. She longs to see the world. All this comes across without physicalising, telling us, or even introspection. Focusing on the dilapidated, aging ruins of the town also introduces a sombre tone for the story and contrasts with the posters in the room, reinforcing those feelings. The tone in turn colours how we interpret the story and the feelings we get out of it.

This kind of emotional scene-setting can also be influenced by the metaphors and similes we use:

> Sometimes I made use of the fathers of friends. Not that those selfish girls were really willing to share. But there were times when I sat next to real fathers in movie theatres, with the exquisite texture of a man's coat brushing my arm. And I listened to the sound of their voices with the happiness of a dog that has no use for words and is desperately alert to tone and pitch and timbre.

Hilma Wolitzer's 'Waiting for Daddy' is about the ramifications of growing up without a father. The comparison she makes between herself and a dog gives us this feeling of wanting to impress, of admiration, even of

adoration. Highlighting the texture of the man's coat makes something precious out of the ordinary with a sense of deep longing. She communicates what's special about this girl's reaction.

You might think this only works in first or third person limited because there's a lot more character naturally built into those perspectives, but *Beartown* is third person omniscient and packs emotional subtext into every line. Writing in third person omniscient doesn't mean you have to be cold and objective or that you can't incorporate the character you're dealing with. Fundamentally, don't restrict emotion to a reaction beat after setting the scene and carrying out the conflict. Emotions can be built into transitions, summaries, descriptions, and introspection at any point in a scene.

Avoiding melodrama

Melodrama often arises when you haven't sold the reader on the stakes or characters or relationships at hand—meaning there's this relational gap between what you *want* the readers to feel and what they *actually* feel. The reader just doesn't buy what you're selling. It feels fake. In this case, the problem can be chapters back and isn't as easy to fix. Alternatively, melodrama can arise when expressions of emotion feel overdramatic or unrealistic, but there are specific techniques to help avoid that. Consider the following:

> 'So… where do we go from here?' he whispered.
>
> 'I don't know!' she cried, throwing her arms up.
>
> The man spun on his heel to face the window, slamming his fist against the glass. 'It wasn't meant to be like this. We —' he stole a breath, 'we were meant to be happy and fall in love and die old together.'
>
> She rolled her eyes, fingers scraping through her hair, then wailed intensely, 'You… you never saw us for what we really were!'
>
> 'Us?' he whimpered. He stormed up to her, gritting his teeth. 'There never was any "us". Clearly, it was always just you and him!'

> She fell to her knees before him, hands clasped. ‘Please!’ she begged. ‘Give me another chance! I’LL TRY BETTER!’

Many things make this passage feel melodramatic. First, every line is treated as this big, physical moment—throwing his arms up, spinning on his heel, wailing intensely, storming up to her, and begging on her knees. Not everything we feel comes out in physical reactions, especially ones as dramatic as this. This all comes from trying to physicalise and communicate the emotional importance of these lines, but this many instances so close together isn’t as relatable.

Next, the passage gives you emotional whiplash. She goes from rolling her eyes to wailing intensely to falling to her knees before him in an instant. We don’t get to build up to these big physical moments. Even though the passage treats all these as big moments, we don’t have the infrastructure to buy into them. They just happen. Capturing emotion is just as much about how people try to control, hide, or not feel things, but there’s none of that here. There is no tension between the inside and out—no subtext. It’s all on the surface. Big physical moments *can* work, but we want to be led to them, to see characters dragged to them against their will.

Third, look at the dialogue tags. We’ve got cried, whispered, wailed, whimpered, and begged all in this short moment. I recommend checking out the chapter on dialogue, specifically the section on dialogue tags, for more detail, but the short version is this: The word ‘said’ encompasses a lot of the ways we talk. People naturally read intensity, pauses, volume, and cadence into dialogue on their own and interpret dialogue through the surrounding context. These verb-tags wave a huge flag, insisting this scene is dramatic and practically begging the reader to buy into it. The same can be said of exclamation marks, ellipses, and capitals. This many elements of emphasis, this close together, make it feel very melodramatic when a lot of that emotion would have come out naturally, anyway.

Finally, the constant bodily expressions cripple the momentum in what should be a fast-paced scene. It creates gaps between what each character says.

While we don’t see it in this passage, another common feature of melodramatic writing is excessive poeticism. I fall down the rabbit hole of too many elaborate similes, metaphors, and poetics in describing emotion

all too often myself. You want to communicate how complex and deep and nuanced this character and their experiences are, but it's hard to capture, so you end up writing yourself deeper and deeper into bizarre language choices until the emotion doesn't feel grounded. Consider the following from *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

> It was a deep abyss, a hole inside her that never ended, where all the wind went dead and the stars were black, and the leaves of fate fell where they may, casting her down and leaving her a discarded rag of fear and hopelessness.

The emotion here comes across detached and abstracted from anything real. We're bombarded with metaphors and similes which are difficult to contextualise to any real human experience, and consequently, it doesn't feel real. The passage we examined from *The Testaments* uses four distinct poeticisms, but Atwood made sure they were grounded, relatable, and mixed in with a bunch of introspection, all of which gives a perfectly clear picture of the human experience she's trying to capture. They were tied to specific, relatable things better captured by poetics. Poeticism is great because it lets us capture things we might not otherwise be able to, but they also require careful handling. Each layer of metaphor is a small abstraction, but the point is to bring us closer to an experience, not make it more nebulous.

For contrast, consider this passage from my book *Three Kinds of Silence.* I use a big, physical reaction and some poeticism, but it isn't melodramatic.

> Myumi drifted upstairs to the alcove, wine in hand. She was on her third when she went to Hoshiko's room.
>
> The moment she set foot inside, she tripped on an old power cord. She hit the ground, the red wine spilling everywhere, a bloodstain soaking into the floor of a dead girl's room.
>
> Myumi seized a rag to scrub it out, but it only spread, fainter but more permanent. The carpet was too far gone already, but she refused to stop, scrubbing more vigorously, violently because a stain was allowed anywhere in the house but there. The moment she stopped trying was the

> moment it'd be there forever. She worked till her knuckles were red and sore.
>
> Myumi slid to the ground.
>
> Tears came whether she wanted them or not. Silently at first, then sobbing into the puddle of soap and alcohol, squeezing the rag as if to strangle it.
>
> When she brought herself up, she sat back against what used to be Hoshiko's bed. What used to be Hoshiko's old wooden carving of Ame-no-Kaku lay discarded beside her. It was sporting a new layer of dust. She wiped it away with the edge of her dress and put it back up on what had once been Hoshiko's bedside table.
>
> But the room didn't belong to Myumi either. It wasn't hers to pack away. It all existed in some limbo of ownership left in the small print of life.

Myumi is left sobbing in a puddle of soap and alcohol, but she doesn't start there. We see her trying to hold her grief back. There's subtext before her emotions get the better of her. There's buildup, anticipation of this burgeoning emotion, and tension that's intimate and relatable. You can see this escalation in the word choice: we start with drifting, then move to tripping, then scrubbing, and finally sobbing. There's not an emotional whiplash. There is a little poeticism, but it's balanced out with introspection and grounded descriptions of real, tangible things. Describing the room as left in a 'limbo of ownership' captures the sense of being caught between two stages of life with no direction for what comes next. The 'small print of life' captures the unexpected, unfair, and unnoticed injustice she has endured: a dead child. We know what Myumi is experiencing.

Describing the same emotion repeatedly can also become melodramatic if we get numb to it, especially if it's just increasing in severity. Oh, they're depressed, but now it's depression on steroids, and then depression on meth. As someone who reads a lot of mental health fiction, I am no stranger to this problem, but the solution is handy. Each time you want to ramp up the chosen emotion, give it a new context—a new angle, question, or problem around the feeling to explore. Depression starts as a struggle to get out of bed but becomes a challenge to maintain friendships or hold down a job.

In *Three Kinds of Silence,* Myumi is grieving over her dead child. She feels lost, isolated, and stuck in this loop. As she begins to heal, she reconnects with her estranged husband, but slowly realises the more time she spends with him, the more she is reminded of the past and her pain. Then, as she starts a new life of sorts, she's wracked with guilt over letting herself be happy. These are all grief, but they're different expressions of it, each of which change the direction of the story. Emotional journeys like this need that layered exploration, so consider what new aspect or question you're targeting each time your character falls back into that emotion. Give how they feel or how they deal with it a unique consequence to prevent the story from going in circles.

Of course, sometimes the repetitive cycle, the frustrating relapse, or the lack of progress is the *point. Bojack Horseman* repeatedly has the alcoholic, flawed Bojack fall into the same self-destructive, self-loathing state—but it's a tragedy. It feels inescapable, but it's intended to.

Dialogue

We covered the following in more detail in the two chapters on subtext and dialogue. Read those to learn more.

A ton of emotion comes out in how people speak—their speed, cadence, the tangents they go on, the number of words they use, stuttering, pauses, interruptions, and framing. Translated to written dialogue, this can all be a kind of showing rather than telling. As with Murakami's work before, you can think of emotion in dialogue in terms of *focus.* People don't typically say they're sad, they say, 'Oh, it was just the worst day at work. There was this woman who had this expired voucher, and I told her we couldn't accept it, but she wouldn't leave the store, and I was trying not to cry, and someone ate my sandwich in the lunchroom, and then the computer wouldn't work, so we had to do it all manually.' Instead of telling people how we feel, we describe what is making us feel the way we do. We struggle to organise our thoughts, hyperfixate, generalize, or misdirect away from the true issue. What we focus on shows a lot about how we're feeling and how we're processing our emotions.

Consider this passage from *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Enrique Maria Remarque.

> ‘Comrade, I did not want to kill you. If you jumped in here again, I would not do it, if you would be sensible too… I see you are a man like me. I thought of your hand-grenades, of your bayonet, of your rifle; now I see your wife and your face and our fellowship. Forgive me, comrade. We always see it too late… Take twenty years of my life, comrade, and stand up--take more, for I do not know what I can even attempt to do with it now… I will write to [your wife], she must hear it from me, I will tell her everything I have told you, she shall not suffer, I will help her, and your parents too, and your child—’

Paul is full of guilt, shame, and sorrow, but he mentions none of that. He describes the reasoning behind his decisions—what he sees and the things which impacted him the most—almost as a way of seeking forgiveness or justification for all that has happened. His focus reveals a lot.

As noted before in our chapter on subtext, contradictions between body language and dialogue can show us what a character is feeling without telling us. Look at this passage from Hannah Lee Kidder’s ‘Wolverine Frogs’.

> She relaxes and pushes my bangs from my face. ‘What did he do?’
>
> ‘He didn’t do anything.’
>
> ‘Emma—’
>
> ‘I don’t know what happened.’ I stare at the rusted brown mixing with bright red on my fingertips.

Emma insists she doesn’t know what happened, but the way she avoids her mother’s gaze shows us she does, but she’s not ready to talk about it. The contradiction gives a secondary emotion to the dialogue.

Differences in a character’s speech patterns can imply a shift in underlying emotion. In *All Quiet on the Western Front,* Paul is short spoken throughout the novel, and the relatively long monologue from the above passage tells us he’s feeling lost as he vocalises his internal mess of emotions. Likewise, disproportionate responses or actions can indicate hidden emotions. A character might explode at the slightest provocation or break down over something minor. Implication is a huge part of how we

speak. Passive aggression, flirting, and diplomatic wording all show rather than tell by giving dialogue an emotional subtext.

Who even needs words?

House of Leaves by Mark Z Danielewski is famous for its use of page space, formatting, and unique grammar to frame the story. In one section, the words spread across the page to represent a rope being stretched, with the final word at a different angle to indicate the rope snapping. At another point, the words are squeezed together, leaving more and more of the page to white space to represent the characters shrinking, more lost than ever in this strange house. *House of Leaves* is full of little tricks to reflect the emotions and state of our characters in the way the words literally appear on the page. In *Turtles All the Way Down,* John Green has intrusive thoughts in capitals to represent them as being louder than the rest of her mind, with no commas or full stops or semicolons to represent her spiralling panic—there is no structure, it is all *feeling*. You might think this is novel, but it's nothing new. We see this in poetry all the time.

Summary

1. It's okay to tell rather than show in small emotions or to keep up the pace.
2. Be specific with the emotion you're describing and think carefully about secondary meanings words can carry. Avoid using 'very' as a modifier. It can indicate you're not being specific enough with your words. A similar thing can be said for adverbs. Clichés tend to get glanced over.
3. Show emotions by physicalising, using character action, and giving narrative consequences to connect scenes by their emotional fallout.
4. Don't restrict emotional exploration to the aftermath or reaction beat of a scene. Look at how you can use it in transitions, summaries, and descriptions.

5. Introspection is perhaps the most important tool when communicating emotion. What your character focuses on and which poeticisms they use can reveal a lot about what they're feeling. Explore the unique aspects of their reaction.
6. Avoid melodrama by building up to big physical reactions, using dramatic and grammar tags sparingly, and keeping your poeticisms grounded in tangible human experience.
7. Emotion comes through in dialogue when people describe the things which make them feel, when we see contradictions between what they say and their body language, differences in speaking patterns, disproportionate responses, and implication.
8. Grammar and formatting can also be used to reflect the emotional state of your characters.

PLOT ARMOUR

Game of Thrones (tv series)
Daredevil
Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Patterson
'What You Left in the Ditch' by Aimee Bender
The Legend of Korra
Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix by JK Rowling

When we talk about plot armour, what we usually mean is the main characters inexcusably surviving something background characters never would. In particular, it's obvious they don't survive because of their skills or decisions but because *the author* is insulating them from the story's effects—even from the consequences of their own decisions. This is sometimes paired with a character inexplicably acting differently to ensure another stays alive—sparing someone for no reason or becoming suddenly incompetent. Even if the protected character uses their skills or makes good decisions, they aren't sufficient to justify escaping unscathed. Sometimes, the solution is just ridiculous, like Indiana Jones surviving a nuclear blast in a lead-lined fridge.

The concept is closely tied to *deus ex machina*, or 'god from the machine', a plot element where an outside force suddenly intercedes in a story to solve a problem. However, with plot armour, there is no interceding character or force in the story. Rather, the author is the god reaching into the story and pulling them out of trouble with little to no justification for their survival offered.

The damage from this is twofold: readers lose immersion and don't buy into the tension anymore. They have no reason to believe the characters are in danger. Side characters are rarely as lucky, and when luck becomes a deciding force in your story, readers will have less and less faith in your characters.

Of course, authors ensure characters survive to serve the plot all the time. Plot armour becomes an issue when they don't hide it very well. This becomes painfully clear when the story repeatedly begs the question 'will

they get hurt?' with no consequences. With enough repetition, we stop believing there is any real threat. We see behind the curtain and see the plot armour. In this chapter, we'll go through how plot armour happens, where it's 'fine', and some techniques to avoid it.

Stories have different rules for death

Plot armour can arise from a story breaking its own expectations and rules around death and danger, and there's no greater example of this than the now infamous final seasons of *Game of Thrones*. In one episode, Arya is stabbed several times in the stomach and dumped in sewer water before healing over the next few days. This stands in marked contrast to Ned Stark being stabbed in the leg by Jaime Lannister in the first season and left limping with a cane for the rest of his days, or perhaps more overtly, when Talisa Stark was stabbed almost identically and bled out immediately during the Red Wedding.

The writers wrote themselves into a corner by injuring Arya this way and needed to come up with a dumb, contrived way for her to get out of it. They couldn't let her die yet. Of course, the most obvious solution is to not write yourself into this corner in the first place or come up with a better reason for them to escape. They could have had Arya stabbed in a less fatal area, fewer times, or left her with lasting injuries. The plot armour problem might be a few pages or chapters back, and the scene where it reared its head might need a rewrite.

All the way back in the first season, Ned Stark's death demonstrated how vulnerable even the main characters are in the series. They can die in seemingly anticlimactic ways, whether or not their arc is finished, and it may not be heroic. It can even be humiliating or unjust. With these expectations set, the writers toyed with this tension for the seasons to come. On occasion, they'd even follow through: the Red Wedding, Khal Drogo, Tommen, Joffrey, Margary Tyrell, and Oberyn Martell. These beats kept that tension alive. However, over time, the main characters began surviving more and more extreme scenarios they never would have in the earlier seasons—Arya being one such example. Breaking those rules over and over undermined the tension we previously had. The story still tried to convince

us this sort of thing was a threat, but after enough repetition, everyone could see behind the curtain and found the plot armour.

On the other hand, a ton of stories take a more light-hearted or elastic approach to death. If a character dies, they get to conclude their arc and probably go out heroically with someone important killing them. *Doctor Who, Star Wars*, *Percy Jackson and the Olympians, Mistborn*, and so many more do this, and people love these stories. Part of the charm is showing a purpose and poetry to death and suffering we don't get in real life. People don't *want* Tony Stark to die from a stray bullet from random terrorist number five halfway through *Iron Man 2*, no matter how realistic it is. We like imagining characters are in danger because it gets us invested. We buy into that fantasy, but within that is some suspension of disbelief around the realities of death. If Arya were in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, nobody would bat an eye when she survives a seemingly mortal wound; those heroes are regularly thrown about like rag dolls. But in *Game of Thrones*, death is more immediate and unforgiving. Manipulating perceptions of death and danger can be part of telling a compelling story.

Plot armour isn't simply when main characters survive things background characters wouldn't. Nobody complains about plot armour when the Doctor, Luke Skywalker, or Black Widow manage to avoid a hail of bullets while the background characters around them don't. That's because these stories still carry out the threat of danger, just under different rules. Some things are not treated as a mortal threat. On some level, we're not really worried Luke Skywalker is going to be shot by a random stormtrooper, and these stories don't typically try to convince us that's a real possibility, but when he faces Darth Vader for the first time, he loses his hand and barely escapes. If plot armour arises in these stories, it's usually because the characters unjustifiably get away unscathed from scenes where there *is* meant to be tension—and they do it so often we just stop believing they ever can be in danger. Imagine if no matter how many times they face the dark lord, nobody is ever wounded or killed.

The Netflix series *Daredevil,* on the other hand, operates by slightly different rules. It goes out of its way to show how Matthew Murdock will come away with sustained injuries when he fights, even if he goes up against random goons. It doesn't suggest he will die, but getting badly wounded is on the cards in a way it isn't in the rest of the MCU. In this way, its rules for death and danger are somewhere between *Doctor Who* and

Game of Thrones. There's still an expectation that if he dies, it'll be at the end of an arc against someone important, but there are enough consequences to keep fights with random goons tense.

Ask yourself what expectations you're giving your readers, then determine if a character's survival transgresses the in-world narrative logic you've established. Don't agonize over every moment of danger, though. Readers can be forgiving. A single instance of plot armour isn't going to destroy all tension and immersion you've built up. If you prove you're willing to carry out that threat every so often—not even necessarily killing a character but hurting them substantially—then that tension will carry over.

The anti-plot-armour murder

Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Patterson is one of my favourite books. It's about two kids who imagine themselves as heroes in a fantastical world. It should come as no surprise someone like me fell so deeply in love with Leslie and Jess as a child. The world of this book feels safe. It deals primarily with social issues and friendship, and death isn't really presented as a threat. The danger is getting beaten up in the locker room or shoved around by a bully. Yet, at the end of the novel, Leslie dies—off the page, killed in a rope swing accident; the implication being the rope snapped, and she cracked her head open on the rocks below.

I had never experienced tonal whiplash like this before, and it deeply impacted me and my writing. This tonal shift was intentional, of course. The suddenness and injustice of death, the inability to reckon with it, and a childish worldview shattered all came through more vividly by Patterson subverting expectations than if she forecasted this kind of tragedy. In this way, the author used a kind of anti-plot armour where the characters you think are untouchable can suddenly die, and especially in ordinary ways. The prospect of death at all stood in sharp contrast to the light-heartedness of the rest of the novel. The light-heartedness was almost illusory, luring us into the same mindset as Jess.

Sometimes, breaking your own rules and expectations can be really powerful. It can sharpen a plot twist, break conventions in a genre, and indicate the story has entered a new era. It raises the stakes and tension, allowing readers to look back on the 'good old times' where things were

happier and simpler. Suddenly, the rules have changed. This crosses over with our discussion on character deaths.

Relying too much on one kind of tension

One way to address plot armour is showing us your characters can lose often and badly. Convince the reader their success is not guaranteed. Let them lose fights, lose things precious to them, and get mortally wounded. Let other characters die. Show the consequences of your antagonist getting away, such as harming another victim, deepening their grip on power, or something more. Let your characters suffer lasting physical or emotional consequences, even when they win. A pyrrhic victory complicates the tension and offers a prospect of a much worse outcome. A character doesn't need to die to establish a threat, as dying isn't the only bad thing that can happen to someone.

The second, and perhaps more interesting, way of addressing plot armour is by varying where you draw tension from, such as struggles over their identity, relationships, morality, mysteries, or whatever else. In *House of Leaves*, there's a lot of tension over whether our main characters are losing their minds or seeing things correctly for the first time. In 'What You Left in the Ditch' by Aimee Bender, a woman finds herself attracted to a man with full lips after her husband lost his mouth in military service. The question is not 'will she survive?' but 'will she cheat on her husband?' Both stories have consequences which reverberate throughout the story and don't rely on death. Varying the tension doesn't necessarily take away plot armour, but it means there are alternate sources of tension your readers can get invested in, even if they don't believe the characters are in physical danger.

In fact, this can also be more personal. Relationships, principles, and internal struggles are how we get attached to characters and foster empathy. Where survival is often an abstracted threat posed by faceless enemies, these are intimate questions of identity which make us care more when characters are in danger. I might not fear they can die, but I might fear they'll get a divorce. If you find yourself relying too much on throwing

random bad guys at your characters, considering giving them scenes where they instead face moral dilemmas, need to figure out a mystery, or must salvage their relationships.

You can look at this on a scene-by-scene level. Identify the 'whether' question each scene is asking: whether they steal the totem, whether they agree on a course of action, or whether they give in to their anger. Identify the stakes, what the feared outcome would be, and what catharsis the reader is offered at the end, if any. If you mostly rely on danger or death, where do you demonstrate your characters can lose? How viscerally? How do you complicate their success? Fundamentally, people aren't going to worry about plot armour if you're not spending words or screen time on whether they'll get out alive.

In the television series *The Legend of Korra,* we know Korra is probably shielded from dying at least until the finale, so the writers rarely use that as the main source of tension. Season one asks whether she will lose her powers, something she has always defined herself by. There's a personal dimension adding a lot of tension to the story. The threat is a lot more believable and is even momentarily carried out. In season two, her identity as the Avatar—a demigod-like figure responsible for the world—is thrown into question when she loses permanent access to a core ability, giving us a real, enduring, and devastating consequence. Even if she might not be in mortal danger, terrible things can happen to her and other people. It's only in the last two seasons that the writers really threaten Korra physically, and they make good on that threat. She is crippled and left struggling with her mental stability. Plot armour never becomes an issue because we've been shown she can lose, the tension comes from a believable threat, and tension is always maintained through other questions beyond 'will she survive?'

The 'yes, but' tactic

Not every scene can feature a personal crisis, and that's fine, but you can still make scenes full of danger more interesting by introducing dilemmas, secondary objectives, and costs. Sometimes, the characters might survive but fail to accomplish their goal. Or, they might achieve a primary objective but fail a secondary one. They may even succeed at all their goals, but at some cost. This is the 'yes, but' concept.

In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, our characters end up fighting in the Department of Mysteries. They found a prophecy that Voldemort wants to get hold of, and his Death Eaters have come to take it. They have two objectives in this scene: get everybody out alive and don't let the prophecy fall into Voldemort's hands. This complicates how they have to fight, taking risks they normally wouldn't, pulling them in multiple directions, and they even lose an ally in the battle. Harry ends up faced with a dilemma: hand over the prophecy or his friend dies. While our main cast gets out alive in this moment, Harry fails his secondary objective and hands the prophecy over. Did the primary characters survive? *Yes, but* they lost the prophecy and somebody important to Harry died.

The dilemma complicates the tension and turns it into a problem-solving scene. Even if the characters survive, that success is tainted by losing the prophecy. People reading this aren't thinking about how our main characters survive because survival comes with a sacrifice. On a meta-narrative level, losing something justifies success in another area. The secondary objective could be acquiring the MacGuffin, finding out information, maintaining secrecy, getting to a certain place, using a certain method, or anything at all. Whatever it is, it keeps up the tension by adding a new dimension. Our characters can't simply survive but must survive a certain way. It reinforces the idea our characters can lose. What you don't want to do is present a dilemma but have them get out of it without making some sort of sacrifice.

The 'yes, but' tactic is an effective way to keep the plot moving forward while showing consequences to keep the tension up. Korra might get out alive, but she loses her powers. A character might get out alive but lose their memories. Harry gets out alive, but at the cost of the prophecy and a friend. This doesn't necessarily mean people won't feel there's plot armour, but it does neuter what that term means—escaping without consequence. The tension is redirected to other questions and failures. A character 'surviving' becomes largely immaterial.

Summary

1. Plot armour damages a story because readers lose suspension of disbelief and don't buy into the tension you're relying on. Luck or

incompetence will often become deciding factors in the scene-by-scene tension.

2. Plot armour can arise from breaking pre-established rules or expectations around death and danger. On the other hand, purposefully subverting these expectations can create a powerful thematic statement.
3. Don’t rely too much on ‘will they survive?’ tension. Introduce tension around relationships, character struggles, morality, mystery, or whatever else. Identify the ‘whether’ questions from scene to scene.
4. To keep the tension around survival alive, show your characters can lose—often and in various ways.
5. Use the ‘yes, but’ tactic to complicate the tension and shift the focus from survival to secondary objectives, dilemmas, and costs.

ENVIRONMENTAL DESCRIPTIONS

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood
Beartown by Fredrik Backman
Piranesi by Susanna Clarke
Annihilation by Jeff VanderMeer
It by Stephen King
Sharp Objects by Gillian Flynn
The Return of the King by JRR Tolkien
'Xin Chào, Xin Chào' by Choi Eunyoung
Flowers for Algernon by Daniel Keyes
'Architectural Constants' by Yoon Ha Lee
'Depression' by Tove Ditlevsen
'The Adulterous Woman' by Albert Camus
The Subtle Knife by Philip Pullman

Stories are an escape—a way to unmoor ourselves from this world and cast off into another—but how do you capture those worlds? How do you make them feel as real as the one we live in? In this chapter, we're going to look through some big mistakes writers make, line-by-line techniques to bring your world to life, how to describe the ordinary versus extraordinary, how descriptions intersect with pacing, and a few other tips. This chapter works in tandem with the one we have on character descriptions.

The first mistake writers make

One of the easiest traps to fall into is thinking good descriptions are about finding the prettiest words to replicate what you have in your mind for the reader. The trap being it *is* partly that, but the reality is most readers don't remember many details, so trying to ensure they imagine the place just like you do will not work. Hurling a list of nouns and adjectives at them doesn't necessarily help them remember nor immerse themselves in the

setting, even if it brings them closer to seeing what you do in your mind. Instead, they remember general impressions, feelings, and the *experience* of a place—and the best descriptions delve into that. Consider the opening passage from Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, setting the scene in this gymnasium and establishing wider Gilead society.

> We slept in what had once been the gymnasium. The floor was of varnished wood, with stripes and circles painted on it, for the games that were formerly played there; the hoops for the basketball nets were still in place, though the nets were gone. A balcony ran around the room, for the spectators, and I thought I could smell, faintly like an afterimage, the pungent scent of sweat, shot through with the sweet taint of chewing gum and perfume from the watching girls, felt-skirted as I knew from pictures, later in miniskirts, then pants, then in one earring, spiky green-streaked hair. Dances would have been held there; the music lingered, a palimpsest of unheard sound, style upon style, an undercurrent of drums, a forlorn wail, garlands made of tissue-paper flowers, cardboard devils, a revolving ball of mirrors, powdering the dancers with a snow of light… There was old sex in the room and loneliness, and expectation, of something without a shape or name.

Atwood could have simply listed the varnished wood, stripes, hoops, and balcony in a string of nouns and adjectives, and it would have been accurate, painting a very clear picture of what this gymnasium looked like. But words like 'had once been', 'formerly', 'an afterimage', and 'lingering' focus instead on a contrast with the past, showing us how this setting *feels* lifeless, isolating, and empty of the colour once there—the intimate experience of being in this place. This world has decayed and been stripped of what it was. When we walk through a busy market on a hot day, we don't remember the exact temperature or the precise layout of the streets, but the uncomfortable slick of sweat and dust in the humidity, the sense of getting lost in winding alleys, and the oppressive crowd. These are all integral parts of being in the place.

One common piece of writing advice is to 'use the five senses' since we sometimes rely too much on what our characters can see. Atwood uses

sound and smell details—'the pungent smell of sweat', 'music lingered, a palimpsest of unheard sound'—to feed into creating this isolating, uncomfortable, and lifeless world she wants us to remember. On a fundamental level, writing environmental descriptions is just as much about selecting the right details to craft an impression or experience as it is painting an accurate picture. It's a kind of subtext a lot of people miss. However, those sensory details are often less important than the psychological, emotional, and atmospheric *impression* of a place. In this way, the sensory details of a place do not exist in a vacuum, but as a way to create that impression, and you will want to be conscious of what you are creating.

Sometimes, the experience is that of a specific character, especially in third-limited or first person, as in *The Handmaid's Tale*. We see how Offred longs for a time in the past, imposing that desire on her surroundings, focusing on elements that reflect that.

Other authors might offer a more general experience of a place.

> Beartown isn't close to anything. Even on a map the place looks unnatural… As if nature and man were fighting a tug-of-war for space [and] the town is losing. It has been a very long time since it won at anything. More jobs disappear each year, and with them the people, and the forest devours one or two more abandoned houses each season… Sometimes the entire community feels like a philosophical experiment: If a town falls in the forest but no one hears it, does it matter at all?

We are rarely, if ever, describing a place purely objectively. It's nearly always framed by human experience. *Beartown* is third-person omniscient, but Backman's language remains incredibly evocative. A tug of war between the forest and town, with the town losing? What a brilliant line. Backman could have detailed any number of facts about the town, but he focuses on the experience of the place, and the specific details he includes build into that feeling.

Descriptions are not just lists of things in the setting. Not that details don't matter or that listing a few to ground your characters in an environment is bad, but which details you decide to include will create an experience, whether you intend to or not. The experience can be as simple

as a road feeling busy, a burbling river being tranquil, or an old house seeming creepy. The framing, however small, does change the nature of the place. Telling the reader that the characters ‘stopped by a river full of lily pads’ creates a very different experience than saying they ‘stopped by a river full of pollution’—even if both are completely true.

If you are writing in first or third-limited, then consider which details your character would minimise, emphasise, or notice that others would not. If we return to that passage from before, Offred narrows in on details from times past. She yearns for an era long gone. A character who has never seen a stained-glass window before might narrow in on one when they set foot in a church, while a priest who has seen them thousands of times might not. What feeling do you want the place to invoke, and what lenses are filtering how a place is presented?

Specificity

A description of a table sagging to one side, leaning on a loose and wonky leg, is far more interesting than calling it a ‘broken brown table’. Susanna Clarke’s *Piranesi* is a fantastic example of this.

> The Ninth Vestibule is remarkable for the three great Staircases it contains. Its Walls are lined with marble Statues, hundreds upon hundreds of them, Tier upon Tier, rising into the distant heights.
>
> I climbed up the Western Wall until I reached the Statue of a Woman carrying a Beehive, fifteen metres above the Pavement. The Woman is two or three times my own height and the Beehive is covered with marble, Bees the size of my thumb. One Bee—this always gives me a slight sensation of queasiness—crawls over her left Eye.

Clarke gives general descriptions of walls and staircases, but she goes out of her way to give us a much more specific image: a woman carrying a beehive with a bee crawling over her eye. The specificity is more visceral and interesting, and it sparks a sense of queasiness in us as well—nobody wants a bug on their eye, even a cute wee bumblebee. Specificity allows

you to control the experience of a place more sharply. General descriptions like ‘a broken brown table’ tend to feel airy, vague, and perhaps less real and experiential. A ‘hall full of statues of all sizes’ is much less interesting than a ‘Statue of a Woman carrying a Beehive [while a bee] crawls over her left Eye’.

Part of the game is knowing where to be specific and where to be general. In our chapter on character descriptions, we discuss using distinguishing features to make one character distinct from another, and a similar principle can apply here. Being specific with memorable and distinct features, as *Piranesi* does, helps form an image around them—especially elements which contradict a reader’s expectations.[6] When describing a castle, you might be general when describing the ordinary walls but specific when describing the central tower of marble, glass, and crystal. Alternatively, you might be specific about the walls if they’re especially old, covered in vines and runes, and have ancient patterns across them. Specificity is also important where you want the reader to visualise things closer to what you have in your mind, or elements especially important to your characters. If a feature feeds into the impression you want to give of a place, being specific might help.

However, avoid exaggerated descriptions where everything has a bizarre quirk in hopes of making it memorable. It becomes a gimmick. You don’t need a specific detail to be particularly colourful. You could have a church with a cracked altar, a house where every door creaks, or a cellar so old and damp there’s moss in the corner. These are all relatively ordinary, but the specificity helps, nonetheless.

Word choice

Being specific with your descriptions isn’t just about narrowing in on details, but the diction you use to capture them. Consider this passage from Jeff Vandermeer’s *Annihilation.*

> A purple flowering vine had colonized the lighthouse wall and curled itself around the remains of the door on its left side.

The vine hasn't just 'attached itself' to the door, but *colonised* it—a word with connotations of being possessive, invasive, or personal, especially in the context of this book. *Annihilation* is about the blurred line between us and our environment, and simple word choice in this description helps communicate those themes.

In *The Handmaid's Tale,* Offred doesn't just hear an 'echo' of the past but a 'palimpsest'—a manuscript on which later writing has been superimposed, obscuring what's beneath. Gilead is a society attempting to burn away the past, hide it, and force these women to hide who they are too. Identity erasure is a huge part of the story. Look for whether you could use more specific adjectives, verbs, or nouns with more interesting connotations to add subtext to your work.

However, be wary of falling into purple prose. It's obvious when people refuse to use terms like blue or red, and instead everything is cerulean or vermillion. What does this add?

Looking back to our example from *Piranesi*, Clarke creates a visually stunning image, but none of the verbs or nouns are especially unique. Saying the beehive was 'enwrapped' in marble doesn't add much meaning over 'covered' in this context—in contrast to *Annihilation*, where 'colonised' very much does over 'attached'.

Categories of description

There are a lot of different reasons to describe the environment around your characters. We've already covered the first: to set the scene and immerse the reader in the experience of the place. This is simply about grounding people in your story.

Maybe you want to use description to explore how a character sees the world—as in *The Handmaid's Tale*. After being mugged at knifepoint, a character might view dark alleyways as a tangle of shadows or fences as resembling knives. Their perception of the place might have shifted. In that case, the physical space you're describing matters less than what we can infer about the character from how they perceive it.

We've already discussed how *Annihilation* uses description to reinforce theme, but you can also use descriptions to create tension. Consider how King describes the house on Neibolt Street in *It*.

> About halfway down this fence Richie could see a monstrous grove of sunflowers—the tallest looked five feet tall or more. They had a bloated, nasty look he didn't like. A breeze rustled them and they seemed to nod together: The boys are here, isn't that nice? More boys. Our boys. Richie shivered.
>
> … They looked up and down Neibolt Street… The street was utterly deserted. Richie could hear occasional cars passing on Route 2, but could not see them.

King narrows in on the sunflowers, a specific detail which suggests this place is sick, monstrous, sentient, and even *hungry*. There is a promise of horrible things to come. Of course, he also frames them that way. The empty street is not merely describing a lack of people but implying the characters are *alone.* Your descriptions can introduce questions or points of tension to be later resolved. If you describe how a castle is crawling with guards, it's less about the experience of the place and more establishing a threat and the question of whether our characters can sneak past them. Character, tension, and theme are the connective tissue in any narrative, but it's up to you to know where these intersect with environmental descriptions best.

Another reason to describe the setting is to introduce features relevant to setup and payoff. If your characters will need to escape through a castle's portcullis in a later scene, describing the portcullis can put a little flag there in the mind of the reader. It helps, especially if the tension relies on knowledge of these things.

In *Sharp Objects,* Gillian Flynn goes out of her way to remind us repeatedly of a 'dollhouse… fashioned to look exactly like my mother's home'—often just as a feature in the scene's background—because it eventually returns during a major revelation. This doesn't need to be particularly specific, and sometimes features are implicit. Nobody is going to question tables being in a dining hall during a fight scene, even if you don't mention them explicitly. However, the more coincidental a feature might be, the more you need to set it up in your descriptions.

You can subtextually indicate which features of a location are more important. You're laying out a mental landscape as much as a physical one, directing their attention to the important places. If you spend a lot of time

describing this or that, we'll expect it to be a more important element of the setting or more narratively relevant.

The last reason for describing the environment is simple: if you want to describe something, do it. You're the author. These are just guidelines, and you shouldn't feel like you need to conform to some arbitrary set of rules to be considered a good writer. I've said before: for every common bit of writing advice, there are a hundred books which do the opposite with incredible effect. There's a reason Tolkien spends so much time describing *nature* in his stories. He *likes* nature. He made it important. If you're into architecture or economics or glassblowing, then go ahead and delve into these as much as you like. No story is going to work for everyone, and trying to cater yours to be the perfectly accessible book just stunts your own style. Writing is just as much about what authors get out of it as what readers do.

I have spent a lot of time raging against lists of details since they're often unmemorable, uninteresting, and kill the pacing. This is all true. However, this doesn't mean a string of details cannot be useful. *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Beartown* both do exactly that, but the string of details they provide all inform the overall experience and sense of space. A list of details can be their own kind of specificity. *The Handmaid's Tale* gives a series of tactile, physical details attached to specific smells and sounds, even if no particular one stands out that much. What you don't want is a list of random details which don't mean that much on their own or collectively create an experience.

This is something JRR Tolkien has been criticised for. He has a brilliant command of the English language, but his descriptions sometimes fall into the 'long list of unmemorable details' category. Look at how describes Minas Tirith in *The Return of the King*.

> For the fashion of Minas Tirith was such that it was built on seven levels, each delved into the hill, and about each was set a wall, and in each wall was a gate. But the gates were not set in a line: the Great Gate in the City Wall was at the east point of the circuit, but the next faced half south, and the third half north, and so to and fro upwards; so that the paved way that climbed towards the Citadel turned first this way and then that across the face of the hill. And each time

> that it passed the line of the Great Gate it went through an arched tunnel, piercing a vast pier of rock whose huge outthrust bulk divided in two all the circles of the City save the first. For partly in the primeval shaping of the hill, partly by the mighty craft and labour of old, there stood up from the rear of the wide court behind the Gate a towering bastion of stone, its edge sharp as a ship-keel facing east. Up it rose, even to the level of the topmost circle, and there was crowned by a battlement; so that those in the Citadel might, like mariners in a mountainous ship, look from its peak sheer down upon the Gate seven hundred feet below. The entrance to the Citadel also looked eastward, but was delved in the heart of the rock; thence a long lamp-lit slope ran up to the seventh gate. Thus men reached at last the High Court, and the Place of the Fountain before the feet of the White Tower: tall and shapely, fifty fathoms from its base to the pinnacle, where the banner of the Stewards floated a thousand feet above the plain.

While Tolkien gives a perfectly accurate and very detailed description of how the gates and layered walls are laid out—important for the sense of space in the battle that later takes place there—he also gives a lot of details about precise measurements and whether features face this way or that. This is fascinating stuff for worldbuilders or deep fans of Tolkien's work, but for the average reader parsing this passage, these minutiae don't conjure much of a memorable feeling of the place. When we talk about specificity, it doesn't usually mean measurements. Some of this could be trimmed. On the other hand, Tolkien's later passage captures the experience of the city much more convincingly.

> Yet it was in truth falling year by year into decay; and already it lacked half the men that could have dwelt at ease there. In every street they passed some great house or court over whose doors and arched gates were carved many fair letters of strange and ancient shapes: names Pippin guessed of great men and kindreds that had once dwelt there; and yet now they were silent, and no footsteps rang on their

> wide pavements, nor voice was heard in their halls, nor any face looked out from door or empty window.

Not only are these fantastically specific details, grounding us in this city, but they give us the experience of Minas Tirith as this hodgepodge of forgotten generations and lost empire. Symbolically, Aragorn's return to the city is the return of these great houses.

When not to describe

We've covered many reasons to describe your setting, but the counterpart is knowing when you can hold back.

Sometimes people think they're 'setting the scene' when what they're really doing is describing things which are irrelevant and slowing the story down. Most of Choi Eunyoung's 'Xin Chào, Xin Chào' is set inside a house, but she barely describes it—intentionally so. We get a passing mention of the fire, a suede sofa, and a bookshelf, none of which are particularly memorable. This is because sometimes the setting doesn't matter all that much, especially when it comes to ordinary places readers can easily imagine—and often better than you could ever write. Houses, parks, a busy road, and even a castle or a satellite station are settings most readers are familiar with. There is power in letting the reader imagine. If your setting doesn't deviate from what someone might expect or the sense of space isn't very important, then simply saying it was a house, a river, or an office building might be enough.

In contrast, Eunyoung *does* describe the city they're in—once at the start and once at the end.

> … a small city called Plauen… Deserted buildings, empty parks, men sitting around streetcar stops reeking of alcohol.

> The city was much smaller than I remembered and had fallen into even deep decline… to the point of looking eerily deserted. My old school had turned into a small factory and a few old men were smoking in the backyard, watching me absently. [My old home] still stood in the same spot facing the park.

There is this intentional thematic comparison between the person she was as a child and the person she is as an adult, and this is reflected in the city: her old school, a place of playtime and youth, has been transformed into an adult workplace. It has declined, degraded, and lost colour and optimism. The setting has a deeper role to play here, unlike with the house, warranting further exploration.

People often skip description or prose to get to dialogue because they think this is where the conflict and story really happens. In a sense, they're right, but they don't have to be. Like with *Annihilation* or 'Xin Chào, Xin Chào', you can do all sorts of creative things with description which furthers the narrative, deepens your characters, and develops your conflict —keeping their attention.

If you come from fantasy or science fiction circles, all this might sound pretty bizarre, but it's actually very common in literary circles, especially in stories where we spend a lot of time inside our characters' heads. *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes is intensely psychological. It's about a mentally disadvantaged individual who one day finds themselves a genius as the result of a surgery, seeing themselves, others, and the world entirely differently. The focus of the story is on his relationships and new emotions. It explores how he rationalises people's treatment of him, internalises this mistreatment, and contextualises others' behaviour. The setting, for the most part, is entirely immaterial, so Keyes spends very few words on it. Your story might be in a similar realm.

In fact, sometimes intentionally withholding details about a place can be very effective.

> The city lies at the intersection of leys that move through seas and continents, and stretch into the vastness beyond the visible stars. The city extends upwards and downwards in preposterous arches and chasm-spanning bridges.

You can almost call this Lovecraftian. This is from Yoon Ha Lee's 'Architectural Constants'. The city described here is a vast, complicated place which defies the laws of physics. This description is basically all we get, but it's intentional. These details alone allow us to imagine the majesty and wonder of this place, even if all our mental images will be entirely different. The more important thing is we get the feel of this city as something outside our understanding of how the universe is meant to work,

full of strange, inexplicable structures and impossibilities. Trying to describe something outside the human experience is often a fool's endeavour, so authors fall back on poetics and ambiguous language like this. Being too specific can even obfuscate the forest for the trees.

Description tends to be proportional to the role a place plays in the story, meaning you often don't need to describe much at all. If a location is only around for a paragraph or two, if it doesn't even feature for a full scene, or the scene takes place primarily inside the character's head without much physical interaction with the world, you can get away with very little if no description at all. In Eunyoungs's 'Xin Chào, Xin Chào', the characters barely interact with the house, despite much of the story technically being set there. It's all about the internal monologue.

All too often, characters will stop somewhere for the night and the author will give a detailed, elaborate, and poetic, often beautiful description of the river and surrounding grove under the guise of 'setting the scene', only for them to move on the next day with nothing happening there.

It's hard to say where the line between necessary and superfluous description is. It depends on the needs of your story and can vary based on your taste and style. Choi Eunyoung is brutally minimalist with her descriptions and focuses on character interactions while JRR Tolkien takes us on long, painstakingly detailed journeys throughout his world.

Ordinary places

Piranesi's simple description of staircases and halls filled with hundreds of bizarre statues is visually captivating on its own. The real challenge is making ordinary places fun to read about. Let's explore how Tove Ditlevsen describes cleaning dishes in 'Depression'.

> Lula stacked the dirty dishes on top one another in the nearly scalding water, so parsley sprigs, wilted lettuce leaves, and radish tops released and floated on top in a sad, greasy stew, which she appraised, disgusted for a moment, before she could bring herself to plunge her hands down into it and bring the porcelain out.

This isn't a setting, but the same principle still applies. Washing the dishes is an ordinary, everyday activity. There isn't even much of a unique character perspective here. Ditlevsen could have written, 'she cleaned the dishes in hot soapy water, then left them to dry on a rack beside the sink.' It would have been an accurate account of events. Instead, Ditlevsen framed it with specific details which evoke a powerful feeling of disgust. Specificity can make anything emotive and familiar. Nobody enjoys sticking their hand in grimy water with bits of food in it, and certainly not something described as a 'greasy stew'. Despite the activity being ordinary, her word choice and framing get into the nitty gritty of the human experience and evokes a visceral reaction. Squirming disgust is interesting even if pouring dishwashing liquid over a plate isn't.

Mundane places or activities can still feel empty, pointless, calming, fruitful, lost, chaotic, or whatever else you choose. For further reading, I'd recommend Hilma Wolitzer's *Today a Woman Went Mad in the Supermarket*. It's a masterclass at turning the mundane into the fascinating.

Alternatively, you can give an ordinary place specific details which create fun visuals, such as Albert Camus did in 'The Adulterous Woman'.

> Beneath her, the blue-and-white terraces of the Arab town overlapped one another, splattered with the dark-red spots of peppers drying in the sun.

Camus is describing an ordinary town, but the specific detail of peppers drying in the sun makes it pop with colour—red juxtaposed with the blue and white of the terraces. It's just enough to make something ordinary distinct. You could describe the childish chalk drawings on a neighbourhood road, a shortcut carved through a park, or a reception desk with two bowls of lollies, one of which is always full because nobody takes them. These are all ordinary but interesting details which tell us a bit about the people who occupy these spaces.

How description hurts pacing

When we first learn to write, we can fall into a certain scene structure: we set the scene, explore a conflict there, and then have our characters

introspecting for a bit. Rinse and repeat. It's a natural structure to fall into it, but the downside is it often means the opening description of each scene stalls the pacing of the story. People even skip over it to get to the conflict. *Desino, describo, moveo*. I stop, I describe, I move. We've already covered some ways descriptions can move the story forward, but there is another way to get around this issue: character action.

In Philip Pullman's *The Subtle Knife,* there are several pages of Will exploring a strange city, but it's not just him describing the city in the abstract with the prettiest words possible. It's littered with him engaging with his surroundings. This intersects with the old rule of 'show, don't tell' which we already discussed in an earlier chapter. Description doesn't need to be relegated to the beginning of the scene, but can be woven into dialogue, conflict, and character introspection, simultaneously building out the world while progressing the scene. Instead of simply describing the reeds in the river at the start, have your characters chase a frog through them. Instead of describing how big and bustling the city market is, have your characters get lost, caught up in a whirlwind of sales and promises.

Most of the descriptions we've looked at in this chapter have some degree of internalisation or dialogue mixed in. Blur the line between description and conflict. Experiment with writing which flits from location to location, follows the thoughts of a character more than their geographical location, slipping in momentary bits of dialogue where it fits. Description isn't only for setting a scene; interactions with the setting can *be* the scene.

Fundamentally, description is a kind of exposition and it can be hidden in many of the same ways. You can withhold it to create suspense, weave it into a scene of tension or humour, or connect it to character context. If you're worried about excessive descriptions hurting your pacing, look at ways to break it up.

Summary

1. The experience of a place is often more important than its details. This can be a character's experience of it or the experience of the place more generally. Which details might your character minimise, emphasise, or notice more than others?

2. Specific details are more vivid, memorable, and interesting than general descriptions. You want to bring your reader into contact with tangible, real things—not vague images. Figure out which details capture the experience or stand out. Think about the connotations your noun, verb, and adjective choices will carry. Exaggeration for effect can backfire.
3. You might describe features relevant to setup and payoff, how a character sees the world, the themes, the tension in the scene, features which deviate from expectations, or simply if you want to go deeper into it. Lists of details work when they feed into these things.
4. Knowing when not to describe is just as important as learning how to. If the setting isn't relevant, if it's incredibly ordinary, or if your scene takes place inside a character's head, the reader can be left to imagine the setting.
5. Even ordinary settings can be made interesting with specific, tactile details which explore the human experience.
6. Consider interweaving your descriptions, conflict, and internalisation to keep up the pace and make your prose more interesting. Humour and suspense can obscure expositional descriptive writing.

ELEMENTAL MAGIC SYSTEMS

Avatar: The Last Airbender
Lightbringer by Brent Weeks
Mistborn: The Final Empire by Brandon Sanderson
The Northern Lights by Philip Pullman
Rise of the Guardians
The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe by CS Lewis
A Song of Ice and Fire by George RR Martin
The Wheel of Time by Robert Jordan
The Dragon Prince
Percy Jackson and the Olympians by Rick Riordan
The Legend of Korra

When I was eleven, I wrote a fantasy book about four kids who discovered they could each manipulate an element. Originality wasn't my strong suit. To anyone familiar with it, the television series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* obviously inspired me in the way we all are by stories we love growing up. We try to replicate the magic, so to speak, we find in those stories in our own way, yet this example touches on something deeper than that. Something keeps us coming back to elemental magic systems. The beautiful simplicity of earth, fire, water, and air, and even things like metal and wood, and quintessence. These things possess a tangibility that can't be expressed by blasts of light or vague enchantments because they are from the world around us.

The narrative role of the elements

The great thing about elemental magic is the wealth of cultural, religious, and historical depth that already comes with each element. In Greek mythology, fire was associated with transformation and purification, while Hinduism associates it with spiritual illumination and enlightenment.

Water was connected to fertility in Egypt, cleansing and initiation in Christianity, and adaptability and 'effortless action' in Taoism. Air has been variously associated with wisdom, knowledge, emptiness, freedom, life, and the spirit realm. The elements are such a natural and instantly communicable way to express and explore these ideas because we all have a shared experience with them.

This pre-existing thematic depth makes it easier to code your characters and world with ideas, arcs, and qualities. In Brent Weeks' *Lightbringer* series, Kip Guile is associated with a kind of earth magic: manipulating plant growth, communing with the natural world, and eventually healing others. Given nature's ability to regrow and bounce back, even after disasters, the earth element has long been associated with renewal, and we automatically impose that on Kip Guile's character. It creates a real or imagined depth to the magic before we're even told what it might mean. A city full of fire magic immediately feels a bit dangerous and daring, but also full of life and passion. If a character uses water magic, we're primed to imagine them going with the flow, moving in such a way to mimic how water moves.

Magic can be an analogue for character growth and struggles right from the beginning without needing to explain their in-world associations. In Brandon Sanderson's *Mistborn: The Final Empire,* Kelsier is associated with fire because of how often he 'burns' steel. In this magic system, consuming different types of metal gives one different powers. Fire has long been associated with passion and anger, and Kelsier's arc is one of learning to control his emotions and channel them effectively. A former slave, Kelsier hates the oppressive Empire with a burning passion, and as he learns to control that anger, he refines his fire magic, as well. This pre-existing context gives a more visceral and visual way to develop this character trait. We don't have this with, for example, the power of witches to separate from their daemons in Philip Pullman's *The Northern Lights.* It takes a lot more story context to understand what this means.

Not only can elemental magic help explore individual characters but the dynamics between our characters. We don't design characters in isolation, but with how they fit, conflict, and contrast with others in mind to further the story we want to tell, and elemental magic naturally supports this. If the lancer is a hothead who uses fire magic, then the water-magic-wielding heart might cool them down, literally and figuratively. Someone with earth

magic might be concerned with rehabilitating their enemies while a fire user might destroy them outright.

By dividing the elements between characters, you give everyone a unique role and can tie how the characters relate to one another to how their elements relate to one another. The go-to example here for me is *Avatar: The Last Airbender,* though other stories like Flavia Bukor's *The Prophecy of the Stones* or Sherry Thomas' *The Elemental Trilogy* do the same. In *Avatar: The Last Airbender,* the spiritual, free-minded, and pacifist protagonist Aang uses air magic while the passionate, justice-oriented, and more morally grey Zuko uses fire. In the episode 'The Southern Raiders', Aang urges a friend to forgive their mother's killer while Zuko insists facing the killer may be the only way to properly heal.

Opposite people will often wield opposite elements and their magic can bring those conflicts to life in more interesting ways through magical metaphor. Suddenly, disagreements between characters carry the visuals of fire clashing with water. Anger comes with bursts of uncontrollable flame. Heartbreak freezes the world over. Liberation comes with flight. The magic complements whatever you're doing on a narrative level.

How many times have dwarves been associated with stone or fire, being hot-headed but hardened smiths, not unlike their volcanic surroundings or beloved gemstones? Or even more commonly, elves live in concord with the world around them, singing trees into new forms and using earth magic. While this can come a little too close to the planet of hats cliché, where whole planets or communities are seemingly identical, these themes have featured in beloved stories a thousand times over and clearly don't deter a large group of people from enjoying them. There is something universal, accessible, and mythic about it.

In *On Writing and Worldbuilding: Volume I,* we explored how elemental magic can also impact your worldbuilding. While we don't have the space to re-hash that in this chapter, I'd suggest looking there for more detail.

The flaw in the system

All of this might be alluring, but it comes across as bland and unoriginal these days. Just as many elemental magic stories have entered the beloved annals of fantasy history as have fallen on the wayside to be forgotten and

even panned as the years have gone on. A fire user's arc involving him learning to control his anger? As if we've never seen that before. The earth wizard's arc being about her learning to become more flexible? How original.

One way writers keep elemental magic feeling fresh is finding new narrative associations and roles for it. This is how one of my favourite childhood films, *Rise of the Guardians,* crafted such a compelling character in Jack Frost. He completely subverts our expectations of a character associated with ice, snow, and the cold. He is not slow, grim, or dark. He doesn't possess the evil nature or crystalline beauty of CS Lewis' White Witch from *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Instead, the film gives us a Jack Frost all about fun, rebirth, and living in the moment. The film opens with Jack helping kids slip and slide around the neighbourhood, trying to make friends of his own, and the framing highlights the intimate beauty of ice particles spreading across the ground. His character arc is about him finding his own place in the world, learning to work with a group, and taking up responsibility—things not traditionally associated with ice. He's treated as a character outside of his element. Jim Butcher's *Codex Alera* series associates earth with lust and sensuality, largely through earth's association with being in touch with one's surroundings. We haven't seen this association much before.

Giving a character abilities which contrast with their desires or goals can be an interesting conflict to explore. Martha Wells' *Murderbot* series explores an android weapon who isn't particularly interested in being a weapon anymore, and the tension between what they're designed for and what they want to do creates a series of fascinating moral dilemmas. They repeatedly must decide between protecting other humans or themselves and wrestle with whether they can forgive themselves for their past deeds. Imagine a fire mage who wants to do nothing more than heal or an air mage with agoraphobia.

Elements do not need to be an analogue for a character's traits or arc. In the unsurprisingly named *A Song of Ice and Fire* series by George RR Martin, Beric Dondarrion's repeated resurrections by way of fire magic explore death as the ultimate equaliser and expose the flaws in binary moral systems. Despite Dondarrion's fire god being portrayed as the 'Lord of Light' and all that is good, each time he returns from the dead, he comes back a little less human. Fire is life and light, yes, but it also burns away

something inside you. It consumes. Morality is not as binary as the believers like to think.

The elements can be used to explore the dynamics of your world and the themes in your stories. In CS Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, Narnia being overtaken by a magical winter helps establish how unforgiving and grim this world can be, showing how evil has permeated the land and the good has seemingly left it, perhaps even their God has abandoned it—all because of our cultural emphasis on the coming of spring. Robert Jordan famously uses his magic system in *The Wheel of Time* to explore gender relations. There is a divide between the 'masculine' elements of fire and earth and the 'feminine' elements of water and air. The ways in which these elements express themselves, combine, and contrast become a commentary on how men and women relate to each other. From this, I hope you see the elements can be used to explore the world, establish tone, and articulate themes independent of characters wielding them.

Elemental systems are the technicolour dreamcoat of magic systems. They can be whimsical and light-hearted or dark and sacrificial. You can change how the elements work to lean one way or the other. Perhaps earth magic kills the plants around you, making for a grim world full of dead forests, or perhaps fire is controlled with instruments and song, leading to a world full of musical wizards with battles being fought with rhythm and melody. The rules of your magic system—the costs and limits—will heavily shape the tone they give the story.

Alter the elements themselves

In Wonderstorm's *The Dragon Prince,* the magic system isn't based around any variation of the classical elements. Instead, it uses the sun, moon, stars, earth, sky, and ocean. While familiar and instantly communicable, the aesthetic and framing are fundamentally different and give the series a more unique take. More importantly, the elements express themselves in ways we haven't seen before. The moon gives one the power to create illusions while the sun lets one burn away sickness. These play with ideas we already associate with the moon and sun. Sanderson's *Mistborn* series is an even weirder example of elemental magic: it uses the periodic table from tin to iron to zinc. Tin sharpens one's senses while iron

allows one to manipulate metal nearby. By changing the base elements to begin with, the reader is less likely to roll their eyes at ‘another elemental magic system’.

What *Mistborn* and *The Dragon Prince* have in common is a believable unifying theme, and even a philosophically coherent one. The elements aren’t merely different for the sake of it. I once read a book which gave kinetic, shadow, sound, and light as their four elements. It was distracting how obviously they were just trying to be different, and the elements themselves didn’t add enough to the world or the characters to be worth the awkwardness. Readers notice these things. Reinventing an old, well-trodden trope is not just about being *different*; it’s about being *clever*.

Laws of a magic system and relative tension

This wouldn’t be a chapter on magic systems without referring to Sanderson’s laws in some way, would it? Firstly, your ability to solve problems with your magic is proportional to how well the reader understands said magic. Second, limitations are more important than powers. Third, go deeper into what you already have before you add more —more sub-powers, more elements, or more crazy abilities.

Let’s say your characters can create fire. How much and to what degree can they control it? You can’t really weigh it and sometimes this sort of thing is difficult to communicate to the reader. Costs like ‘exhaustion’ are vague and prone to feeling contrived so that characters have *just* enough to do what’s needed for the plot or *just* not enough because the plot needed for them to fail.

Rick Riordan deals with this well in his *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* series with something we can call relative tension. Percy, being the demigod son of Poseidon, can control water to a degree, but Riordan writes his stories to repeatedly demonstrate the specific set of Percy’s abilities. He can breathe underwater, speak to marine creatures and horses, and heal himself—though only when in physical contact with water. He can also navigate treacherous areas of the ocean easily. By showing Percy using these skills repeatedly, we can understand their limits, scope, where they

apply, where they don't, what they can do and what they *can't,* meaning problem-solving in the plot comes down to how he uses these established powers. It's less about the rules of the magic system in the abstract and more about how an obstacle compares to past instances of Percy's powers. We understand how dangerous something is relative to that. Without any sense of consistency or predictability, elemental magic can feel a little too close to 'a wizard did it' for my liking.

The third rule is perhaps the most overlooked: go deeper before you add. I've always loved how they introduced flight as a new air magic ability in *The Legend of Korra*. It is perhaps the most organic expansion of powers in the series, seamlessly growing out the narrative at hand and deepening what we already know without unbalancing the system as it stands. There's a temptation in elemental stories to continuously add new elements or sub-elements, but I tend to find stories which delve deeper into the elements they already have are more effective. Gaining the ability to fly fits in with air's association with spirituality and flexibility, and it flows from the character who gains it losing the love of his life—his one earthly attachment. How can you expand the elements you already have to elevate your story beats?

Summary

1. Originality is more about how you use the elements narratively than simply having a different elemental setup. One advantage to elemental magic is how it can be used as an analogue for character growth, theme, tone, and setting. However, this runs the risk of falling into clichés.
2. Pre-existing cultural associations with the elements allow us to code characters and places with traits without necessarily exploring them deeply. However, this can be less original. Consider new associations and expressions we haven't seen before.
3. Elemental magic systems fit perfectly with common group dynamics like the five-man band and the power trio, allowing you to reflect how they clash, bond, and change over time in their powers.

4. Consistency and predictability are fundamental to any magic system, but sometimes the relative tension of an obstacle is more important than precise rules and limits. Consider going deeper into an element before adding new powers.

ANTIHEROES

Game of Thrones (tv series)
Star Wars: A New Hope
The Colour of Magic by Terry Pratchett
The Millenium Trilogy by Steig Larsson
Captain America: Civil War
Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep by Philip K Dick
A Song of Ice and Fire by George RR Martin
The Last of Us (game)
The Silence of the Lambs by Thomas Harris
V for Vendetta (film)
Sicario
The Testaments by Margaret Atwood
Breaking Bad
The Last of Us Part II

With the rise of grimdark—exemplified by shows like *Game of Thrones*—and dark re-imaginings of fairytales, antiheroes have been all the rage for quite some time. Historically, the term has been used to describe heroes who didn't fit the noble and romantic aristocrat. Heroes were meant to be highly capable, confident, and intelligent, so antiheroes were physically weak, cowardly, or from the lower classes. Nowadays, the term refers more to heroes who come with a sprinkling of darkness, and you can usually find them somewhere between their childhood trauma and the bottom of a whiskey bottle.

Describing them as 'heroes with unheroic characteristics' is circular and unhelpful, so instead, we're going to examine them through the lens of three common antihero features.

First, they do good but for selfish reasons such as profit, revenge, or because it's the only game in town. *Star Wars'* Han Solo is the classic example of this. In *A New Hope,* he's willing to help Luke, but only in exchange for a promise of cold, hard cash. Terry Pratchett's *The Colour of Magic* features Rincewind, a failed wizard who reluctantly saves the world more because he wants to go back to living a simple and safe life of mediocrity than because he wants to be the hero.

Next, they do good but with questionable methods: they're violent, careless, and murder or even torture—the chaotic and neutral good. They view laws and rules as arbitrary or weigh their merit based on whether they serve the greater good. These characters are willing to do what the goody-two-shoes heroes won't. *V for Vendetta* sees our antihero brainwash, torture, and manipulate an innocent woman to forge her into the perfect weapon to bring down a fascist autocracy.

Finally, they do good but face extreme inner demons which inhibit them, such as alcoholism, mental health struggles, or anger issues. They isolate themselves and are heading down a self-destructive path. This last one blurs the line. All heroes have struggles, and this isn't a reason to label someone as 'unheroic' anymore. However, self-destructive and antisocial tendencies are common hallmarks of an antihero story. Jessica Jones from the eponymous show, Rick Sanchez from *Rick and Morty*, Lisbeth Salander from the *Millenium Trilogy*, and Tyler Durden from *Fight Club* are just some examples of these kinds of troubled antiheroes amongst many.

It's important to remember these terms are attempts at categorizing people, something which is always flawed because people are infinitely complex. No character is going to fit perfectly into these boxes. Sometimes, terms like 'hero' just aren't helpful ways to think about a character and are needlessly restrictive. Whichever combination of traits your antihero has, the key element is something complicating the way they do good—either making it more morally ambiguous or conscientiously difficult. All of this exists on a spectrum, but at some point, we draw a line between hero and antihero.

Antiheroes complicate the plot

Lisbeth Salander from Steig Larsson's *Millenium Trilogy* is one of the most compelling antiheroes of the last few decades in every sense of the word. She's a tortured soul, an outcast visually and psychologically. She's a vigilante hacker whose personal problems make her reckless, endangering herself repeatedly, drinking too much, and refusing to accept help because it makes her feel weak and dependent. Not only that, but she is perfectly content to torture and murder where justice can be done. She wants to free

herself and take down the system that wronged her, but all of these personal issues make it difficult for her to do that.

Salander's antihero tendencies complicate the plot repeatedly. She alienates her friends and allies and nearly gets herself killed in half a dozen totally unnecessary ways. She goes off alone to track down her evil father when she didn't need to and ends up with a bullet in her skull. Her antisocial tendencies aren't just character flavour to make her seem edgy or cool but become significant points of tension in the story.

Alternatively, antiheroes might find themselves part of a group, and their issues can create interpersonal problems, preventing them from integrating. A Lisbeth Salander type might let the group down because they were blackout drunk, or their excessive violence might divide the group over how to handle an enemy. Lisbeth ends up the central suspect in a murder investigation because she tied her abuser down and tattooed his crimes on his body, only for him to turn up dead a little later. Her allies are left to clear her name while she goes into hiding. She clashes with Blomkvist, a journalist who believes that sunlight is the best disinfectant—meaning revealing the truth about the villains will lead them to justice—while she prefers to deal with the bad guys personally and violently.

If you're designing an antihero as part of a group, they usually occupy the position of *lancer*: a character who stands in contrast and sometimes opposition to the more traditional *leader* hero. Tony Stark and Steve Rogers from the Marvel Cinematic Universe are straight from the textbook here. Tony is self-absorbed, self-destructive, prone to a god complex, and willing to do whatever it takes while the humble, grounded Steve never believes the ends justify the means. This brings them into conflict in *Captain America: Civil War* and *Avengers: Age of Ultron.*

It's worth thinking about your antihero's flaws, morals, and issues in terms of how they impact other characters around them, particularly the leader. If Tony Stark's main struggle was self-loathing and addiction, then he wouldn't as strongly contrast with Steve Rogers. Their differing methods and justifications create a more direct conflict. In this sense, Tony's antihero lancer presents a moral conundrum to Steve's hero leader, and the hero leader presents an opportunity for change in the antihero lancer, colouring their relationship with difficult decisions and impetus for growth. Something divides them but also connects them. Working together may bring out other elements of their characters or force evolution on both sides.

They are foils to each other, bringing flaws to the surface, highlighting their respective strengths, and forcing confrontation that evolves both characters.

The *heart* character—the emotional core of the group—will often soften the antihero, helping them work through any traumatic backstory they might have. If they're doing good for selfish reasons, the heart might help them find better motivations. If they're doing good with questionable methods, the heart might show them a better way to live. In a more morally complex arc, the reverse might happen as the antihero corrupts the heart, or the two may end up meeting in the middle.

There's a consistent push-pull dynamic in antihero stories. The antihero's unconventional methods or unorthodox morals help resolve the tension in one way but complicate it in another. Blowing up a civilian building might be more effective, but are the other heroes willing to cross that line? Threatening a mob boss' family might work, but does it make them any better than the cartels? Killing a witness helps them pull off a heist, but suddenly leaves them involved in a murder investigation. If antiheroes are defined by their moral greyness, what does that mean narratively? Without exploring these consequences, you can risk ending up with a character who is continuously more effective than our other heroes but whose methods and lack of moral stipulations never seem to have any ramifications. This can create a bit of a mess thematically.

The antihero outside the plot

We often think of antiheroes purely in terms of what they can do for the plot: how many bad guys they murder (or even good guys from time to time), the moral dilemmas they create, their inner turmoil, or how they turn against the other heroes, but it can add real depth to show these characters in normal, healthy circumstances where their moral greyness or issues do not interfere. It also changes the dynamic they have with the reader.

Deckard from Philip K Dicks' *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* desperately wants a real, flesh and blood sheep, something that isn't just another goddamn robot. This is entirely separate from his job hunting down pseudo-human replicants, and it goes a long way towards giving him a complex internal world. Lisbeth Salander is such a vivid character because of how much we see of her daily, non-antihero life. She's allowed to exist

outside of her problems and tendencies. The reader can see her from other angles and align themselves with her in other ways. This kind of personal connection helps make antiheroes more relatable and can soften their rough edges. John Wick goes on a murder spree, but we see his softness in how he related to his dog.

If the only engagement we have with them is around them killing where the hero won't, they can be a bit one-dimensional. When they're doing 'antihero things', you want the reader to think back fondly on the times we saw them functional and happy or imagine them living a different and normal life. How you show them in other contexts will colour how we interpret those darker moments.

Antiheroes and positive arcs

Character arcs can be positive, flat, or negative. If an antihero has a positive arc, it'll often move towards doing good for selfless, at least better, reasons, using better methods, or overcoming their struggles. Han Solo in *Star Wars* grows to fight for what's right rather than for money. Jaime Lannister in *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George RR Martin transitions from villain to antihero, learning to rely less on threats of violence and instead using diplomacy and compassion. In *A Storm of Swords,* he is sent to break the siege of Riverrun. While before he might have assaulted the castle and put every soldier to the sword, he instead tries to negotiate with the defenders and offer a peaceful resolution where innocents don't need to die. This is brought about because Brienne of Tarth—a character about as archetypically heroic as you can get—causes Jaime Lannister to question his methods. This is a prime example of the leader and lancer dynamic we spoke about before.

Forcing an antihero to resolve their personal issues in order to resolve the plot can make the climax multidimensional. Perhaps they need to leave behind their alcoholism to truly reunite with their family. Lisbeth Salander learns to ask for help and not go at everything alone by the end of the trilogy after Blomkvist repeatedly stands by her. This is not always done well—see *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*'s now infamous 'Martha' moment.

If the antihero's arc involves changing methods, consider reckoning with the consequences of their actions from earlier. You might bring them closer to their victims, even incidental ones, and force them to see the ripples of their actions. Killing a gangster might mean their family starves. This can even shift into a redemption arc where they must find a way to heal the wounds they've left in their wake. If they are changing motivation, then obstacles they face need to challenge the system of values underpinning their beliefs. Show them things they hadn't considered before, the factors they had ignored, or the reality behind the way they view the world. If they were after a bad guy for revenge, let them have it, but explore how hollow they feel afterwards. They must find a new reason to fight on. Let them see something specific in a new light.

While all this can make for effective storytelling, traditionally positive arcs like this are not necessarily the most interesting way to take antihero stories, and you don't necessarily need to undermine their antihero characteristics. A positive arc may have nothing to do with their motivation or methods. *The Last of Us* has a great example of this in Joel. He starts out as an abrasive, cold man with anger issues who does whatever he needs to survive—including murder. His grief after losing his daughter is pervasive but not necessarily interfering with him doing good. His positive arc isn't about him becoming less violent or changing his methods; it's about him learning to love again and accept family back into his life in the form of Ellie, a surrogate child he assumes the responsibility for. His arc involves him dealing with his personal issues. He is no longer so closed off, but that new love for Ellie ends up motivating him to do some truly terrible, selfish, and even arguably villainous things. While this change in motivation is a positive arc psychologically, it doesn't make him more of a hero. It doesn't change his methods and motivates him to do a different kind of bad. If we were to look at this on a graph, this would be a lateral shift as oppose to moving up towards a higher good.

Don't think you need to do away with a character's violent tendencies or manipulative tactics. As we grow, we improve in some areas while getting worse in others, or more often, we simply *change* in ways which don't truly fit into the 'good' or 'bad' categories. If we learn a terrible truth, leaving us depressed and broken, is that a positive change? If we become braver, stronger, and more confident but struggle to be happy, is that a negative change? What if we change our methods but end up losing? Or we change

our motivations but it destroys our relationships? Forcing it into a binary distinction simply isn't helpful.

In positive arc antihero stories, people look for these characters to change aspects which the narrative demonstrates as unpleasant or harmful. Some stories *won't* portray murdering bad guys as morally questionable at all, some will show an unwillingness to trust is perfectly justified in their world, and others will not condemn someone for doing good for profit. It may be a desperate, gruelling dystopia where everyone scrambles for what they can get. How we interpret an antihero will change with the moral architecture of your story. If your antihero lives in a brutal corporatist society, for example, you'll want to look for something other than their desire for a payday to change about them, such as altering the methods they employ to achieve their goals.

Positive antihero arcs are reflected in narrative consequences and work to create a web of tension rather than showing an archetypical change towards the abstract 'good'. People are not heroes or villains; we are complex human beings who don't fit easily into categories. It's more important to tell a human story than an antihero one, so tell a story about people, not tropes.

How antihero flat arcs work

In Thomas Harris' *The Silence of the Lambs,* Hannibal Lector does not change himself but plays a critical role in Clarice Starling's evolution across the story. He helps her understand criminal behaviour, grow in confidence as a woman in a male-dominated profession, and makes her more cunning and judicious, able to see through manipulation without being fooled. His influence directly and indirectly aids in her survival as she tracks down a serial killer.

Lecter is not an antihero, but he demonstrates how an antihero's flat arc can work. They do not change their core beliefs, values, personality traits, or way of viewing the world, but instead complicate or stabilise the change in other characters around them—the methods, motivations, or viewpoints of typically more heroic characters. In *V for Vendetta,* V stays as morally ambiguous as he was at the start, and in fact his willingness to torture and brutalise Evey for months is vindicated in the narrative. It's shown as

necessary to beat the fascist autocracy and Evey seems to appreciate the strength her treatment gave her. While his relationship with Evey grows, the story is really about how he moulds her from civilian into revolutionary. She changes her methods and motivations to closely mirror his.

In contrast, in *Sicario,* a traditionally heroic protagonist is constantly pushed by a troop of antiheroes to accept that law-breaking, deception, torture, and murder are necessary to defeat horrific cartels at the border. They pressure her to fall in line, but she refuses. She does *not* come to mirror the antiheroes. The antihero isn't always right, can go too far, and you can end up with an interesting knot of tension where we realise the antihero might be just as bad as the villains they're up against. The antihero might even become an antagonist for this other character. We naturally align ourselves with our perspective characters, giving them the benefit of the doubt, but these stories can call those biases into question and force us to figure out where *we* draw the line. The motivations might be understandable but the methods not, or the methods understandable but the motivations not.

Character arcs can be understood in terms of a character's wants, needs, and lies they believe about themselves or the world. In Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments,* the sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, Aunt Lydia has already seen through the 'Lie' another character believes: she knows Gilead is a horrible, dystopian place. She helps this other character come to see the same, passively and eventually actively. The antihero might save the hero when the 'Lie' they believe bites them in the ass, making them more jaded as time goes on. The antihero knows the consequences of the 'Lie' and can foresee them from a mile off. They can also represent what other characters might become if they get what they want or need.[7] In this way, they present a choice to the characters around them: do you want to become like me? When designing an antihero with a flat arc, think about how they intersect with the wants, needs, and beliefs in the characters around them.

Antiheroes and negative arcs

Antiheroes might start out a little morally ambiguous, but there's nothing to stop them from turning to worse methods, worse motivations, or being

overcome by their personal issues. Their antihero characteristics get the better of them, willing or not, and it can even turn them into full-blown villains. Two things make tragedies like *Hamlet* or *Macbeth* compelling: people pursuing what they need or want at the cost of everything, and how each individual step towards the tragedy is understandable even if the whole arc isn't, till one day they're in too deep and can't go back.

In *Breaking Bad,* Walter White starts out as a mostly well-meaning chemistry teacher resentful of the hand the world has dealt him. After finding out he has cancer and knowing he'll never make enough money to leave anything for his family, he takes up cooking meth—or at least that's the story he tells himself. The deeper into this world he goes, the more dangerous it becomes and the more he gives in to his ego, leading him to gaslight his wife and child, lie, steal, kill (in self-defence), and then murder to keep it all going. There are still shades of grey to Walter's journey as *some* of the steps (certainly not all) he takes towards tragedy can be interpreted as self-defence, protecting his family, or being necessary to leave this world behind. However, no matter how much Walter insists he was 'doing it for his family', we eventually realise he's doing it for himself, for fame, for power, for ego—his motivation changed. His methods become more and more brutal. His pursuit costs him everything, and he deserves to lose it all.

In negative arcs, antiheroes often start out conflicted but end up clinging to what they *want* as opposed to what they *need.* Walter White here wants credit, fame, and power, not security for his family like he says. Despite being given multiple opportunities, he rejects what he needs—to get out with enough money to leave for his family. He does not see through the 'Lie' he believes about the world—that his misfortune is the fault of others and the universe. Instead, he doubles down on it, blaming everyone around him and insisting he's faultless. When he finally admits he was wrong, he's in too deep and on the run.

One way to make a character's negative arc more heartbreaking is literary symmetry. In *The Last of Us Part II,* we see Ellie lose her humanity as she gives in to her inner demons. Stricken with grief after watching a loved one die, she pursues the perpetrator across the country, turning to worse and worse methods to do so. Though she insists she's merely concerned with justice, we come to see it's really rage, anger, and her inability to deal with her own trauma that is propelling her. At one point,

Ellie almost turns away from violence and sees what she truly needs. She returns to a farmhouse full of colour, life, and love with her partner, representing a new beginning and continuing on with life, but it's not long before she returns to that vengeance quest. At the end of the story, she goes back to the farmhouse to find it empty. That symmetry captures what she lost in her negative arc. She returns to something from earlier in the story, but not in the same way because she is not the same and cannot go back. She pursued vengeance at the cost of everything and was in too deep before she finally came home. It's a tragedy, and we feel it.

Three important elements for complex antiheroes

Some say the trick to writing a good antihero is to give them a trait that makes them likeable, but maybe you don't care if your antihero is likable. Characters don't need to be. Good characters are *interesting*, fun to read about, or fun to watch. Of course, sometimes being a jerk is just a flaw they need to work on or it's a deliberate character feature you aren't trying to explain away. It can be important for the tension or character dynamics, and that's okay. However, maybe you don't want your jerk of an antihero to only be a jerk. In short: you want them to be complex. There are a lot of ways to go about this, but here are three effective methods to get you started.

The first thing you can do is help us understand *why* they are the way they are. This isn't as simple as giving them flashbacks to a traumatic childhood. There's a moment in *The Last of Us* where Joel angrily tells Ellie —this poor optimistic girl who has grown to adore him and has never really known family—that 'I am not your father, and you are not my daughter'. We hate him for doing this. It's painful to watch. It's cruel even, but we also saw how Joel's daughter died in his arms, and we know he's never truly processed that. He has always blamed himself for her death and is unwilling to see anyone else as family. This information doesn't excuse what he said, but it does re-contextualise his behaviour as an expression of his pain—something we can sympathise with and that foreshadows his arc.

The Testaments spends significant time recounting the rise of Gilead and the torment Lydia went through to survive.

> Twenty women, of various sizes and ages, but all in business attire were led into the centre of the field. I say led because they were blindfolded…
>
> A man in a black uniform orated into a microphone about how sinners were always visible to the Divine Eye and their sin would find them out. An undertone of assent, like a vibration, came from the guards and attendants. *Mmmm*… like a motor revving up.
>
> 'God will prevail,' concluded the speaker.
>
> There was a chorus of baritone Amens. Then the men who'd escorted the blindfolded women raised their guns and shot them. Their aim was good: the women keeled over.
>
> … We were here to see but not to speak: the message was clear. But why? If they were going to kill us all, why this display?

Gilead turned women against one another, forced them to live in rags and sewage, and only those who swore allegiance to the regime survived. *The Testaments* paints Lydia as a pragmatist: she bought into the ideology of Gilead to survive, even temporarily tricking herself into thinking the nation's methods might work. However, at the time of the story, she is secretly trying to bring the regime down from within. She looks down on other women who can't be as strong as her and is perfectly willing to use them to further her own goals. Throughout *The Handmaid's Tale*, we saw Aunt Lydia's brutality. We could not help but hate her. These later revelations do not excuse what she did, but they do re-contextualise them. Even if it doesn't make her lovable, it introduces a layer of complexity. This tension between her aims and methods makes her a fascinating character to read from. Atwood even has Aunt Lydia's chapters presented as letters to the reader, acknowledging the judgment we surely have of her after reading the first book in the series.

What both of these stories do is complicate the methods, motives, and worldview by presenting them in a light the characters and the reader may

not have considered. In some stories, this places the reader in the same position as other characters around the antihero, learning about their past.

Secondly, give them moments of vulnerability or kindness. This feeds into what we talked about before with giving them characteristics outside their antiheroness. Let them feed street cats after a tense night or relax by playing the ukelele. Lisbeth Salander is regularly brutal, cold, and rude to those around her, but we also see moments where she's respectful and cooperative with those who show her respect and kindness. In *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest*, she slowly builds rapport with a doctor while he heals her from a gunshot wound. He helps her stay out of the police's hands and never pries too deeply into why she's there or her past while also giving her the benefit of the doubt about an investigation going on around her. Eventually, she even answers a couple of his questions when she normally wouldn't. This little moment of vulnerability contrasts with her usual interactions, and it prevents what I would call 'gritty fatigue'.[8] Matt Murdock's scenes in *Daredevil* where he talks openly with his priest are similarly valuable. In these, he can be gentle, thoughtful, contemplative, and vulnerable, and we see his violence through the lens of these scenes. We see the directions he could go, where he doubts himself, and the true feelings he otherwise hides.

These moments can foreshadow growth to come. If we see vulnerability in one place, it can come out in others. If we see gentleness in one place, they might change their methods. If we see them understand something in a new way, that can be expanded to change their motivation. Exploring your antihero in vulnerable or kind moments gives you space as a writer to explore their darker side as well. Whether a positive, flat, or negative arc, that push and pull both ways matters.

Lastly, you can make the antihero better than the villain. V tortures Evey, but the fascists are doing worse. Evey's torture is even immediately juxtaposed with the genocidal concentration camps V himself suffered through years before. One question to keep in mind is whether the antihero *needs* to act the way they do to stop the villain? This can introduce an interesting point of tension within themselves or with other characters. Alternatively, you make the antagonist *better* than them in some ways but not others, as in *Sicario*. Perhaps they have better methods but worse motives, or vice versa.

There is no such thing as an antihero

Smoking used to be a normal and accepted part of everyday society, so every character did it. Now, smoking is a subtle symbol your character is going off the rails. As a result, smoking and drinking are more associated with antiheroes. What exactly defines ‘heroic characteristics’ will change from culture to culture and over time. Lisbeth Salander is a tiny woman covered in piercings and tattoos. These features were associated with ‘outsiders’ when the story was written but have become more and more commonplace today. If you’re relying on aesthetics to reflect the inner world of your antihero character, this is something to keep in mind.

Summary

1. ‘Antihero’ can mean a lot of different things, but common features include doing good for selfish reasons, doing good with questionable methods, or doing good but facing extreme inner demons while doing so.
2. Antiheroes complicate the plot. Their inner demons, methods, or motives bring them into conflict with other characters and escalate the tension.
3. Give your antiheroes features outside their murky methods, motives, and inner demons. Allowing us to explore them in non-antihero contexts makes them feel like people outside what they do to complicate the plot.
4. In positive arcs, antiheroes change their methods or motives for the better, often under the influence of other, more traditionally heroic characters. In flat arcs, their worldview influences that of the characters around them, acting as a catalyst for change. In a negative arc, they do not manage to see through their ‘Lie’ and entrench themselves in it, slipping deeper into their questionable methods and motives.

5. Give us scenes which re-contextualise their questionable behaviour in a new light. Show us moments of vulnerability or kindness which might foreshadow further change. This helps to avoid gritty fatigue.

PARAGON HEROES

Captain America: Civil War
The Lord of the Rings by JRR Tolkien
His Dark Materials by Philip Pullman
Matilda by Roald Dahl
Doctor Who
Game of Thrones (tv series)

How do you make paragons interesting? These are heroes who go around inspiring others to be better and always choose the high road. Part of the difficulty with these characters is that these days people want to read and write characters who are grittier, darker, and more morally conflicted—and that's okay. Trends wax and wane all the time. Stories like *Watchmen* or *Game of Thrones* can be read as a response to *The Justice League* or *The Lord of the Rings* (and in the former pairing, this was the intention). Even traditionally heroic characters like Superman have been reimagined in darker contexts. The film *Man of Steel* culminates in Clark Kent having to snap Zod's neck to save others. Instead of always facing up to their destiny, characters like Luke Skywalker or Tyrion become disillusioned with the fight, struggling over whether to act at all.

It's hard to know what this says about society today, but there's a general impression that people find paragons less interesting. On the other side of the coin, we're currently seeing a resurgence of purely evil bad guys after a decade of 'misunderstood villains' and 'extremists with a point'. In this chapter, we'll go through four things to make a great paragon character.

Being the paragon isn't easy

Captain America is probably the most famous paragon in modern media, and it's worth looking at why that is. His stories focus on how difficult it is to keep choosing good. In *Captain America: Civil War*, everyone around him—his friends, the government, world leaders—pressure him to hand

over power, sign the Sokovia Accords, and consign an old friend to prison, and yet he refuses to give in to something he sees as wrong. This decision brings him into conflict with his closest allies, and even when it would be more expedient to kill, to give into his hurt and anger, he refuses to kill Tony. He maintains his moral compass. When faced with the opportunity to 'neutralise a lot of threats before they even happen' with a huge surveillance system, he calls it tyranny—even after seeing the lives it could save. Each of these decisions gets him alienated, betrayed, and almost killed, and yet he persists. He loses his citizenship and friends, and he breaks the Avengers apart in doing what he sees as right. While other characters like Nick Fury or Tony Stark take the easier or more morally grey way out, Captain America makes his own life harder by choosing not only to do right, but to do it the right way. His determination to do good is *interesting* because it's the more challenging option and is fraught with personal consequences.

Consider how costly an unbreakable morality is, repeatedly increasing the tension as it gets more and more difficult to live up to it. Let your hero's morality create obstacles, damage their relationships, and force them into difficult dilemmas. Do they pursue justice if it means betraying a friend? Do they defer to the police or take initiative themselves? Some of the most interesting scenes are those where the paragon has nothing but bad choices. Doing good in one way might allow another injustice to slide, while doing something bad once might serve the greater good.

If being morally correct isn't costly or difficult, then you end up with a character who is probably likable, successful, and always right—and that's dangerously close to a Mary Sue. You can have these sorts of characters in the periphery, but if they're responsible for solving the plot, it can become grating.

Their inflexibility can strain their relationships with others. People can get frustrated with their inability to see things any other way, to bend at all, or even to entertain that there are other ways of looking at the world. Good exists in multiple forms. A paragon's inflexible morality might lead them to make decisions prematurely, simplifying their reality to binary choices when life is more complicated. Their lack of character flaws might intimidate or alienate others rather than inspire them to be better. This is especially the case if the paragon hasn't been through what other characters have. It's easy to always choose the right thing if you don't have any skin in

the game. It isn't always easy to be around people who seem to have it all together in a way you just don't.

On the other hand, in times of dire need, their imperturbability can be inspirational. It can draw people to their side. It can win the day when they might not otherwise. The paragon will fight alone, but it's because they are willing to do so that others stand by them. We see this with the dynamic between Captain America and Ant-Man in *Captain America: Civil War*. Ant-Man *only* fights for Captain America because he believes in him. He's the sort of guy who, if you see him making a stand, you want to stand with him.

Being morally correct doesn't mean you aren't reckless, and it certainly doesn't mean you're smart. Idealism can leave you blind to the true threat at hand. Believing the best in others can mean you don't see others exploiting you. If you view the world as full of good actors and bad actors, do you miss the subtle evils of bureaucratic monotony? Doing good isn't just killing the worst guy with the biggest gun, but can include giving people access to quality education, affordable housing, and reliable justice institutions.

Finally, you can use these dilemmas and challenges to explore deeper, more philosophical themes. Why do people choose to do good? How do we know what's good? These and other moral quandaries aren't easy questions and can make for some fascinating stories. Suddenly, you're exploring your paragon's emotional and moral architecture in a more nuanced way than 'good versus bad'.

Paragons have feelings too

Because paragons are usually morally right, inspirational, and generally get the job done, they tend to have flatter arcs where they don't change as much. Their core principles and values, even if challenged, aren't likely to change. They can come across as a bit flat, and the bad ones are completely one-dimensional. But even if you don't care to give them much of an arc, it's important to show they can still struggle, feel, and suffer. It's not just about there being obstacles and external consequences to the path they've chosen but showing how it affects them personally.

This is why I adore JRR Tolkien's Frodo Baggins as a paragon. He's pure of heart, takes on the quest to destroy the One Ring out of self-sacrifice, inspires others around him, and shows mercy to Smeagol. However, over the course of the story, we see him slowly slipping, losing himself and his mind to the powers of the Ring. By the end of the final book, he's left weak and broken in such a way he cannot integrate back into society nor go on living the life he once did.

> 'How do you pick up the threads of an old life? How do you go on, when in your heart you begin to understand... there is no going back? There are some things that time cannot mend. Some hurts that go too deep, that have taken hold.'

The wounds from choosing good may never heal.

In the end, Frodo succumbs to the Ring's temptation and takes it for himself, but Tolkien is making an interesting point about the paragon here: nobody can make the right choice every time. We are human. The paragon doesn't really exist. True good is instead found in how we strive toward that ideal for as long as we can and true heroism is not only about doing the *right* thing but also doing the *hard* thing, which Frodo persists at despite the difficulties, only failing at the last moment. Heroism in striving is the closest a person can truly come to such an ideal of perfection. Being the paragon isn't just difficult, but impossible. Frodo's pain makes him feel real. While his moral code doesn't so much change, he, as a person, does. As he falls deeper into despair, the Ring breaking him down, his choice to go on becomes ever more noble. Not every feeling needs to be an arc, but expressing these things deepens your characters.

Alternatively, you can give them an arc or struggles entirely outside of challenging their core values and worldview. Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* series does this with Lyra Belacqua. She does what's right because it's right, is undeterrable, and goes around inspiring others and turning enemies into allies, but she's also a lonely social oddball who never feels like she truly has a home, and her family has largely rejected her. While she doesn't quibble over doing right or wrong so much, she does struggle with feelings of abandonment. Her intense independence comes from a need to be self-sufficient from a young age. She struggles with grief after the loss of her oldest and only friend—a grief which drives her to Hell

and back. Even with betrayal after betrayal, she wants to believe the best of people. She grows and bonds with others over the course of the story without struggling over what's right or wrong.

Paragons change the characters around them

Roald Dahl's *Matilda* is a perfect example of the paragon influencing those around them. Virtuous and unendingly good, Matilda fights for what's right because it's right and inspires others around her to do the same. Her defiance in the face of her school's villainous headmistress Trunchbull leads other students like Lavender to rebel, showing them this tyrannical woman is not all-powerful. She gives her teacher, Miss Honey, the courage to stand up to Trunchbull and take back control of her life, recognising her own inner strength and potential. Matilda doesn't change all that much herself, although her circumstances do. In this sense, the paragon can act as an important catalyst in the arcs of others around them, whose change is equally important to resolving the plot.

Character arcs usually involve a complicated web of what the character wants, what they truly need, and the 'Lies' they believe about the world or themselves. The 'Lie' is not necessarily something someone has maliciously *told* them, but it is something they have become convinced of. They might believe the law is just and unquestionable, only to see that it *isn't.* Miss Honey thinks she's weak and undeserving of love or happiness, and so doesn't fight back against Trunchbull—until Matilda helps Miss Honey see through that Lie. Your paragon might be able to see what another character truly needs before they do and push them towards realising it, presenting it as an option or warning them off the path they're heading down. Their desire to do good might come from having once been in a similar situation. Give your paragon scenes where they make decisions other characters will have to face in the future so they can demonstrate how to handle it. If a character is struggling to push on, have the paragon reach out and empathise. Often, the paragon will be a lynchpin in the group, holding it together. They can be the nuts and bolts of other characters' arcs.

The Doctor from *Doctor Who* turns the paragon's ability to inspire others on its head. In 'The Stolen Earth', the (mostly) paragon Doctor is summarised as, 'The man who abhors violence because [they take] ordinary people and fashion them into weapons.' Inspiring others also means they sacrifice themselves for you or for your causes. Of course, the Doctor never intends for them to sacrifice themselves but it happens regardless. How does a paragon live with that? If your paragon has to watch friends and allies die and suffer for them, do they end up with survivor's guilt? Do they feel responsible? Are you inspiring people to be better, or inspiring people to die? If you're willing to die for what's right, but the universe keeps taking everyone *but* you, I can only imagine how hard that would be to deal with.

Donna Noble from the same series is a creative take on the paragon inspiring others. She genuinely believes she's a failure, worthless, talentless, going nowhere in life, and, as she puts it, 'nothing special'. The Doctor, being someone who sees the inherent worth in everyone, doesn't realise how deeply rooted this lack of self-esteem is for her. They dismiss the idea whenever she talks like that because of how obviously special and brilliant she is to them. Here, the paragon is blinded by their own worldview to the point it *prevents* them from truly empathising with others. It's only later in the story the Doctor acknowledges just how deeply Donna believes in her faults and works to address it.

Killing the paragon

Game of Thrones' Ned Stark is morally right, likable, courageous, and just. He's as paragon as can be, but he's a paragon in a world where being morally right has little bearing on whether you survive. As Ser Barristan says: 'Rhaegar fought valiantly, Rhaegar fought nobly, Rhaegar fought honorably. And Rhaegar died.' Ned's drive to do things the right way gets him captured and killed at the hands of those who cut corners.

The paragon's death is symbolically powerful. It can alter the thematic landscape of your story world and shift the tone, but it also leaves other characters with nobody to guide them. Their decisions and the consequences to follow are now wholly their own. Ned is continuously brought up in the arcs of others as the object of nobility, with characters

trying to live up to his memory but also knowing the fate he was left to. Does the paragon's death galvanise a previously disparate group, helping them put aside their petty differences, and push them to do together what the paragon could not do alone, or does it show them the risks and push them to take a different path? Do they fall back into old ways?

The problem with reactive scenes

The active-reactive structure is a common scene setup. It presents an active scene with a goal, conflict, and disaster or success, then a reactive scene where the characters react to what just happened, face a dilemma, and then decide a new way forward. Reactive scenes are a really important place for getting to know our characters. We see how they feel, how they think, and how they wrestle with decisions. The problem with paragons is that the dilemma and decision beats don't carry quite as much weight if we always know they'll make the right decision.

Because of this, paragons' reactive scenes will often lean more into the reaction beat. In *The Northern Lights,* Lyra comes across a boy who has had his soul ripped from his body. This only fuels her desire to do right by others, so we explore how Lyra feels seeing this. She wonders what it must be like to have that part of you cut away. She fears being separated from her own daemon (a companion animal everyone has which represents their soul). Would you still know what love is? Would you still want things? For someone so alive and full and passion as Lyra, this prospect is horrifying.

People process emotions in all sorts of interesting and unique ways that can give your characters nuance. They might overshare their emotions, shut themselves away, or take up painting in the wilderness. They can react in ways which endear us to them or push us away, so if you want to show growth in your paragon, you can change how they process their emotions. There's nothing saying the morally upstanding hero has to be good at communicating their feelings.

Secondly, the dilemma and decision beats are often more about the other characters around them. There's a scene in *Doctor Who* where two sides are on the verge of committing genocide, giving in to their worst natures. The Doctor pleads with them all to avoid bloodshed, which is his emotional reaction (especially because he's committed genocide himself). However,

the dilemma and decision are out of his hands. The paragon's reaction here plays a vital part in how other characters face this dilemma and decision, and eventually they all put down their weapons. Because we know what the Doctor would do, the tension instead comes from how the others will act. In this way, paragons are most useful in the space between other characters or in contrast to them.

This doesn't mean a paragon can't grapple with a moral dilemma. It can be a lot of fun to put them in positions where the good option isn't clear or there are only bad options. It forces them to confront the complexities of the real world and figure out their values on a deeper level.

However, it's important to remember descriptors like 'paragon' are just tropes. These are labels we've all come up with to describe certain types of characters, but yours don't have to fit any of them. A lot of the time, terms like 'hero' and 'villain' just aren't applicable and you'll end up shooting yourself in the foot thinking of your characters as tropes instead of figuring out how real people might handle a given situation.

Summary

1. Paragons might be right, likable, and get things done, but these characters tend to work better when it's difficult or costly to keep choosing good. It can create obstacles, damage relationships, and create dilemmas.
2. It's important to explore how paragons feel even if they don't struggle over what's right or wrong. Alternatively, they might evolve and change in ways which don't affect their core values and beliefs.
3. Being a paragon does not mean they can't be reckless, stupid, or blind to how others view things. It might mean others sacrifice their lives for them or they miss more subtle evils. They may be wrong entirely.
4. Paragons change characters around them. They can often see through a 'Lie' others believe about themselves or the world, urge them in the right direction, or warn them of the path they're going down.

5. The paragon's death can be symbolically and narratively instrumental. It leaves the surrounding characters to either take up after them or find a new way forward.
6. Reactive scenes with paragons will often focus more on their reaction, while the dilemma and decision beats focus more on the characters around them.
7. It can be interesting to place the paragon in a position where there is either no obvious good option or where all options are bad.

ON WORLDBUILDING

DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood
Torchwood
Attack on Titan by Hajime Isayama
Shards of Earth by Adrian Tchaikovsky
A Song of Ice and Fire by George RR Martin
The Silmarillion by JRR Tolkien
The Elder Scrolls
Altered Carbon by Richard Morgan
Purgatory Mount by Adam Roberts
Dune by Frank Herbert

There are only two certainties in life: death and taxes. Death has been with us as long as there has been life, and it's had a profound effect on every aspect of our existence, including politics, culture, religion, economics, and where and how we live.

The politics of death

Our leaders regularly decide who lives and who dies, even if you don't notice it. This sounds conspiratorial, but death has long greased the gears of power, both directly and indirectly. The powerful decide which infrastructure projects get funding, where community investment goes, how healthcare funds are distributed, which drugs are subsidised, researched, or banned, which regions are conscripted, which crimes are punishable by the death penalty, which types of people receive certain privileges, which cities are locked down during a pandemic, and their foreign policies. All of these, in ways greater and smaller, delay, prevent, or facilitate the deaths of different demographics.

Factions within a government, be it lords or parties, might prevent or delay policies designed to save lives or privilege policies supporting their

power base. A theocracy might rely on churches to provide alms to the poor, meaning regions dominated by other religions lack government assistance, causing the irreligious to die. The cyberpunk genre is full of corrupt, profit-motivated companies whose influence means the poor die in the streets, unable to afford their vaccines or treatments. If one ethnic group rules a country, they may enlist minority groups to fight on the front lines with a 'better them than us' philosophy. A fiscally conservative government might be totally unprepared for a famine because they never invested in the infrastructure to address it. Ninety thousand people died from AIDS during Reagan's presidency after he refused to do anything of substance. The form a government takes will decide who lives and who dies in overt or subtle, complex ways that, when considered for your worldbuilding, add life and detail to a society.

In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale,* dissidents are sent to the radioactive colonies where they will, in all likelihood, die a horrific death. Though *officially* the state doesn't permit men to kill their wives, the patriarchal, underfunded, and corrupt judicial and societal infrastructure simply isn't there to protect them from abuse or spousal murder. Instead, it incentivises a family unit where women have few, if any, rights and nowhere to run if they need to. As a result, women are more likely to be murdered. One policy directly decides who dies, while the other does so indirectly. Think about what the direct and indirect causes of death are in your society.

People sometimes also use death to send a message. There's a famous photo of Thích Quảng Đức self-immolating on a busy Vietnamese street in 1963. He was protesting the persecution of Buddhists by the South Vietnamese government and quickly became a worldwide symbol and media sensation. His martyrdom contributed to the coup later that year, which removed the president from power. Death can spark political crises, especially as a spectacle, but it also creates political narratives, including those of persecution, justice, law and order, non-violent resistance, or of heroes and villains. Martyrs become a rallying point for what they stood for, even long after they're gone.

Of course, these narratives aren't always totally accurate, and martyrs are often used for causes they never even championed. Martin Luther King Jr, a famous proponent of racial equality, justice, and non-violent resistance, died in 1968. Decades after his death, both Democrats *and* Republicans

invoke his image to lend the gravitas of his legacy to their own position. You agree with *him*, don't you? Well, you should agree with *us*! This is even to the point he's used to promote ideas he never would have agreed with in the first place. Martin Luther King Jr spoke firmly in favour of affirmative action policies, yet Republicans have invoked his 'content of your character' to advocate *against* such policies. In this way, martyrdom gives way to myth, wherein a person becomes a catch-all for peoples' political ideas, reinterpreted and adapted to suit their agendas.

The 1782 poem *Boadicea* painted Boudica as a British national heroine who favoured imperial expansion—only she was Celtic, definitively not Christian, and decidedly anti-imperialism given she revolted against the Roman Empire. Later, she would be adopted by the suffragette movement. Martyrs become a malleable projection of a value system, their story edited and reimagined to promote a new narrative. The shared, nebulous myth their deaths are a part of becomes more important than the individual components of their story.

Martyrdom is not just an individual thing, either. In 1923, the Soviet Union orchestrated a famine in Ukraine as part of its industrialisation and in an attempt to eliminate Ukrainian nationalism. Four million people starved to death, and many of the survivors were forced into cannibalism. It did not succeed in crushing their spirit, and in the long term, those deaths helped create a strong Ukrainian political narrative: that they are an independent nation and a different people from Russians. Shared cultural trauma informs politics. Persecution is a persuasive frame to sell things through, for better and worse.

Give your factions martyrs to draw on, squabble over, and give new meaning to their ideals. Martyrdom tells us much about how we frame history—who we paint as victims, who we claim as 'ours', how we tell the story of their deaths, how we use their quotes, and how we draw parallels between them and other things in the world. For a long time, indigenous figures have been rejected by colonial powers, but in our increasingly multicultural world, they've been taken up as national symbols. Comparisons to the Holocaust are a common touchstone when painting a policy or event as inhumane, but they also regularly backfire and undermine the claim being made in the first place. In the cultural consciousness, the Holocaust maintains a unique position as the worst thing humanity has ever done. Comparisons should not be made lightly.

New Zealanders and Australians make fun of each other a lot, but our shared suffering in two world wars has given rise to a strong alliance between our countries. The poppy is a shared symbol for remembering our dead. In turn, we have a lot of sports competitions, population exchange, and shared values. New Zealanders have entitlements in Australia that other countries do not, and vice versa. This is partly to do with their shared colonial history, but it's also because of the shared cultural narrative. Death is a crucible, and when communities emerge from it, they find a way to incorporate these cornerstones of suffering into who they are with huge political ramifications. Challenging this shared narrative can be social suicide, while promoting it can be a political tool.

But this goes beyond the decisions of politicians. Tuberculosis (TB) has killed more humans than virtually anything else. Despite not being as aggressive as other diseases, TB has wiped out nearly a billion people over the last two centuries, and almost two million continue to die every year from it. The kicker here is that tuberculosis is not only treatable but almost always curable. Pharmaceutical companies and the political incentives at play simply make access to the drugs required prohibitively expensive in the places that need it. Four million people who catch it each year are 'missed' by health systems and do not receive the care they need, largely because they are unable to access accurate tests. The company Danaher owns a machine able to accurately identify TB and its required treatment, but by using the 'printer ink' model (selling the machine at a loss but the 'cartridge' with a massive profit margin), the tests themselves are all too expensive. Up until recently, they sold with between a two-hundred-and-twenty percent to five-hundred percent profit margin, meaning in all reality. While it recently offered a minor reduction in its cost when the company came under pressure, it's remains exorbitantly high. While Danaher are not politicians, their CEOs and board members *are* powerful people who, in one form or another, decide who lives and dies for their profit margins, and currently that falls on the world's poorest people.

Consider how large-scale death events in your history inform the political narratives at play: what they need to protect or preserve, who their enemies are, who their allies are, and how the past is invoked politically. Remember that death is a core part of nationalistic narratives. *Attack on Titan* sees the last of humanity living in a ring-walled city, desperately holding out against giant monsters. Soldiers are told over and over that their

deaths will be glorious, they won't be in vain, and that their sacrifice is for the freedom of humanity. Death is *sold* to them, and their deaths are sold to the public.

Political movements which sell people on death are inherently volatile and dangerous. The individual is minimised in favour of the polity surviving. If death is being sold, consider the packaging. Genocide, plague, or other shared death events can also make people more nationalistic, fostering concepts of the 'in group' and 'out group' and taking on more radical forms of nationalism.

Change is an underrated element of worldbuilding when it comes to dealing with death in politics. Too often, we imagine our worlds in terms of how the current forces at play would shape culture and not what came before. Consider how death, these narratives, martyrs, and policies would change over time, building on top of one another. It may be wholly unrecognisable from where it started by the time of your story.

All these things would change if, say, there were a magic spell that could bring anybody back to life. Assassination would be virtually useless as a political tool if the target could be resurrected. Martyrs would take on a whole new meaning. Also, if resurrection were possible, then who can be resurrected becomes a political issue.

While *Torchwood* season four was *not* a good series, it featured a fascinating concept: death stopped. One day, everyone stopped dying. Age nor disease nor a bullet could kill someone, and we watch as governments set up incineration camps to dispose of people. It's truly horrific, but there's some interesting tension over who goes to the camps. Likewise, in an elvish society where people don't die of old age but there are limited resources, how do they decide who gets to have children and when you have to go off into the cold to die?

Culture and death

Every culture has a unique relationship with death. Death can be an all-powerful god we must be wary of, an omnipresent, apathetic force of nature, or a karmic system of justice, gentle or harsh—all of which give rise to different art, funeral rites, traditions, philosophies, afterlife myths, and attitudes towards war, death, disease, suffering, and living. However, this

leads to one worldbuilding flaw: funerals and the like only reflect the purely abstract or religious ideas around death. In the real world, the way we handle death is a complex mix of heritage, economic realities, cultural norms, and, yes, philosophies.

In *Shards of Earth* by Adrian Tchaikovsky, the humans who live in deep space take turns insulting the person who died and raise a drink before ejecting the body into the void. This minimal and informal ceremony is honestly more an expression of economics than values. With few resources in the depths of space, they don't have much to make a funeral of. This also presents a culture of banter—a sense in the depths of space that you might not all get along, but you're all each other has. The Day of the Dead in Mexico is uniquely full of colour, life, food, and music, but in much the rest of the world, death is a dim, solemn affair. This doesn't purely arise from a belief that death is natural and should be mocked, confronted, and dealt with using laughter and joy at the same time. Their unique Mesoamerican, Spanish, and Catholic heritage changes how they express themselves, the clothes they wear, the music they sing, and the food they make in ways that include expressions of their philosophy around death.

In George RR Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire,* those who follow the Faceless God view death as a gift to end suffering. Adherents of the Lord of Light associate him with life and fire, while the Other is associated with cold and death. The denizens of the Iron Islands paint death as a crucible, a way towards righteousness, even going as far as drowning and resuscitating themselves as a rite of passage. There are an infinite number of ways cultural views of death can be reimagined.

Consider giving different places regional flavours of the same traditions and think about which factors might impact how people interact with death outside their value system—the norms of daily life, historic cultural influences, and even the natural resources of the area. Perhaps instead of candles, they use a special type of oil because it's cheaper. Perhaps instead of coffins, they wrap corpses in blankets because they live in a desert. Oftentimes, the ideological justification for a funeral rite only comes *after* the economic reality shapes it.

What if the afterlife is real?

We know climate change is destroying the planet. We can see it happening right now, every year. It is an existential threat to our existence and the lives of thousands of species. So, what do we do? We get rid of plastic straws. Something being indisputably true does not stop us from obfuscating the issue, redirecting our efforts to things which feel more immediately pressing, or coming up with milquetoast compromises.

In a lot of fantasy books, the afterlife is indisputably real, as well. The dead might appear to our characters, we might meet a few of the gods, or heaven might be a great place to take a summer holiday, but there's every chance people would treat death much the same as we do. It being real doesn't mean it's easy to tell how to get to the right afterlife, which religious sect has it correct, or if it's even worth the investment. That ambiguity allows people to do nothing or take perfunctory measures.

Perhaps the afterlife being real would make its religion more widespread, its traditions treated more like a science, and its connection to the law stronger, but there is nearly always room for doubt. Even if Christ came back tomorrow, there would be a thousand other explanations circulating to explain the miracles which many people would never see first-hand. Where there is ambiguity, there is diversity in religion, and that would continue even if they knew the afterlife was real.

People are under innumerable influences: family, friends, cultural conventions, economics, war, famine, social dynamics, and the law. All these facilitate different behaviours. Even in the Medieval period, when peasants went on pilgrimages to Jerusalem, it was just as much about adventure, meeting people, and having a good time as it was about their religious certainty. Pain or comfort in the real world, right now with tangible rewards, is very persuasive when set against a hypothetical pain or pleasure later on. We cannot escape the pressures of life, or if we do, it's seen as a very extreme form of dedication.

This is to say nothing of afterlives which aren't eternal torture. In *The Elder Scrolls* series, people know you can end up in one of the many daedric realms if you dedicate your life to a Daedra (immortal beings somewhere between demons, demigods, and gods—it's complicated). This can be anything from a forest paradise to a mad town where time moves

backwards. Only a few people are ever so focused on getting to a specific afterlife, though. In a world with magic, including illusions, people might doubt what they hear anyway, even if gods walk amongst them. It is never as cut and dry as one might think.

If your afterlife is neutral or forgiving, rather than a heaven versus hell dichotomy, how likely is it people will change their whole lives because of it? On the other hand, if there *are* tangible benefits to dedicating one's life to a god—such as healing, divine powers, or eldritch power—then perhaps it would stratify society in a concrete way.

Reincarnation would change your world even more. In Tolkien's Middle Earth, elves have a different cultural attitude towards death than humans because humans die once and their souls leave their bodies, but elvish souls are tied to their flesh. They reincarnate over and over in the same body, even getting back some of their memories. Death is not as much of a big deal and their funerals aren't as elaborate. The Numenoreans were famously jealous of elvish immortality and reincarnation, so they built huge mausoleums and tombs to compensate, as if they might outlast the elves. However, elves can die of grief, weariness, and loneliness, meaning love and marriage are intimately connected to death in their minds. Marrying another is tying your life and death to someone else. They think of the 'self' and the 'family' very differently from how we do.

Money makes the world go round

The Plague killed approximately a third of the Eurasian population in the fourteenth century, but it also led to some of the earliest labour reforms in Europe. Suddenly, skilled peasants were rare and valuable commodities. They could leave their lords in search of better work and higher wages. English lords, of course, did not like this, and in 1349 passed the Statute of Labourers to prohibit people from demanding wages higher than pre-plague levels. In time, economic pressures won out and wages went up. Similarly, World War I and II saw huge swathes of men killed, meaning women took up work in factories, the military, and even leadership—traditionally male roles. As men died and money flowed into the hands of women, there was a boom in women's rights legislation. Death can give power to people which society previously exploited or excluded.

However, large-scale death events are not all guns and roses. War and disease both decimate local economies. Disease and war tend to impact already disadvantaged communities the hardest; these are communities without infrastructure, healthcare, or the funds to rebuild. Sometimes, government policies to *prevent* death can undermine the economy. During the Covid-19 pandemic, isolation, quarantines, and lockdowns destroyed supply lines, depressed consumer demand, and led to an over three percent contraction in the global economy with eight-and-a-half trillion US dollars lost. These policies eviscerated local businesses while massive corporations survived and now rake in record profits. There continues to be a tension between policies to save lives and policies to preserve the economy.

If you're worldbuilding war or plague, consider how death changes who works in the economy and where, how this alters the social order, and which businesses or supply lines are likely to suffer or thrive. If a city is quarantined, what did they produce? Likewise, consider the same for regions on the front lines of a war. How does the government address the shortfall? Demographic changes create huge new social pressures—such as the caretaking of survivors, refugee movements, and demands for new rights—weakening the state apparatus and threatening revolution.

Death is already a twenty-billion-dollar industry in our world, but it might be cheaper or more expensive in your world. In Richard Morgan's *Altered Carbon,* the uber-rich Methuselahs buy new bodies to transfer their minds into, making them effectively immortal. You can also transmit your consciousness from planet to planet, from body to body. Staying alive is a massive industry, but it also created an over-class of immortal billionaires and dramatically increased inequality.

I don't feel like I've seen enough fiction which really grapples with wealth disparities in a world where elves are immortal and always more highly skilled than their mortal counterparts. Alternatively, immortality might mean the death of the family unit; after all, our current social order is fundamentally built for population replacement. Think of all the other ways that evading death might change a society. In a world where resurrection is possible, resurrection insurance might be a major industry. In a world with reincarnation, if you could track who you were in a past life, what would this do to inheritance laws, or how does what you're reincarnated as affect your social standing? This has already been an important social concept for

centuries in India and could be even more so in a world where this phenomenon provably exists.

Religion

Death is an inescapably large part of religion. Most theological concepts involve understanding it, fighting it, finding a way out of it, or preparing for it. A religion might seek to answer any of the following questions:

- Where do you go when you die?
- What is the afterlife like?
- Why live when existence is pain and history is so full of suffering?
- What does it mean to have a good death?
- Which parts of us continue on after we die?
- What is the nature of the soul?
- What is the purpose of death?
- What can we do in life to affect how we die and the world that comes after?
- How do we come to terms with our mortality?
- Is euthanasia morally permissible?
- When does life begin?
- What meaning should we take from near-death experiences?
- Does karmic justice exist?
- Is death a natural part of life?

With these questions in mind, a religion's depiction of the afterlife will often reflect an idealised vision of daily life. In Valhalla, every man feasts like a jarl on boar and mead given to them by a goat. The boar symbolised power and leadership, while goats were deeply connected to the harvest and prosperity. Privileging the glorious dead in the afterlife validates certain ways of living in the real world—in this case, as a valorous warrior. This vision seeks to answer questions and address struggles found in the mortal world. The Norse often lived harsh lives, and this promise of a privileged reward motivated their warriors. What symbols, environmental cues, and

cultural issues from the past might show up in a religion's depiction of the afterlife in an idealised or mythic way?

Cultures with a Manichean view of good and evil often have an afterlife with a familiar dichotomy—consisting of heaven and hell—while less declarative religions may offer a variety of afterlives which are more neutral in character. Of course, if the gods are real, then these symbols may actually come from the afterlife itself, creating a chicken-or-egg situation. The world mimics the circles of power, and those at the bottom model themselves after those at the top in hopes of rising to their level. They dress like them, listen to them, and speak like them. In the same way, counter-cultural movements are purposefully contrary to those at the top. If this can be said of the rich and powerful, why can't it be said of gods?

However, you do not need to answer all these questions. We assume religions need a moral system, a hierarchy, and answers to death. However, if you're just checking off the boxes, your audience will often see through the trappings. Try changing the formula. Perhaps your religion could focus on ethical questions and not address death at all. Conversely, in *A Song of Ice and Fire,* the cult of the Faceless God *only* addresses questions of death. Tormented slaves who wanted a release from their suffering started the religion, giving rise to a belief that death is a gift, it brings the peace of oblivion, and a good death is a painless one. It doesn't care for questions of morality, nor does it bother all that much with evangelism or hierarchy.

More importantly, religions typically answer pressing questions in a given socio-cultural context. In *Purgatory Mount* by Adam Roberts, there is this civilisation of 'pigs' who are killed seemingly at random by huge statues walking across the land, which they call gods. Their religion seeks to answer why they are afflicted with this unpredictable suffering, calling it a blessing because life is not meant to be long but lived well. It evolved to answer questions specific to their existence. If your civilisation doesn't face the same pressures, its focus will be on different questions, giving rise to different movements and interpretations even within a religion. If you could only die by suicide or heartbreak, like elves, then maybe the religion will be all about asking 'why continue?' or 'why love?' The afterlife often sees these issues resolved.

Beyond this, the problems a religion seeks to address might one day disappear, but their answers will remain or evolve. They become part of an ideological canon influencing every answer which follows after them. In

this way, religions crystallise elements of the past in the present. They become carriers of history, good and bad. Part of the reason so many become these tangled, sometimes contradictory messes is they grow over time in hundreds of layers of philosophy and ideology, each layer arising from a new social context but trying to build on what came before.

Too often, fictional religions are just Roman Catholicism-lite or Hinduism reimagined. These structures are perhaps some of the most common and familiar, but taking the blueprints from another religion and giving slightly different answers and morals isn't all that interesting.

There are an infinite number of factors in how a religion might form. Many questions are universal to the human experience, but not every religion addresses them. They arise to fill a different niche or need. Some exist on the fringes, catering to a particular kind of person or specific concern. Some religions arise post-hoc from political frameworks as a way of justifying these structures while others emerge to facilitate community cohesion. Others are more pseudo-scientific or faux-philosophical ideologies which evolve into a recognisably religious structure, built out of cultural, economic, and social influences which the religion may have never intended. Likewise, there are an infinite number of ways a religion will evolve and adapt to their present context. The infamous 'slave' bible omitted any 'references to freedom and escape from slavery' but emphasised the sections promoting loyalty, submission, and endurance—all to reinforce the slave society of the colonies.

For example, studies have shown mass genocide, war, famine, plague, and other intense periods of hardship have a huge effect on religiosity. Not only do they increase religious dedication both as a way of maintaining community cohesion and making sense of the suffering, but proximity to violence and excessive death make people more likely to take on radical forms of a religion. More conservative, stricter, or even violent interpretations gain traction. We've seen this in the Middle East over the last half century. Intertwine the religious forces of your world with times of war, plague, and hardship by exploring how it changes scriptural interpretation, the power of radical factions, and community bonding. It can even shape how people imagine the afterlife or end of days. For example, evangelical rapture theology became rapidly more popular in the wake of World War II and the Holocaust, taking the suffering of the day as a sign the end times were coming.

Summary

1. Leaders often decide who lives and who dies directly and indirectly. Death can be a political tool, with martyrs forming parts of national narratives or being used to validate political positions.
2. Death has been imagined in a thousand different ways, but funerals and the like cannot only be reflections of contemporary abstract religious ideals. Consider the complex mix of heritage, economic realities, cultural norms, and philosophies which shape how people handle death.
3. Even if the afterlife is provably real, ambiguity and the diversity of human experience will persist. An immediate threat or comfort is often more compelling than a distant one.
4. Death can cause social and economic upheaval and change where from, to whom, and how money and power flows. If death is avoidable, this would be a massive industry.
5. Religions often aim to answer questions around death, but they don’t have to. Afterlives will often reflect an idealised vision of daily life, mimicking the questions the religion answers. Hardship and death increase nationalistic and radical religious fervour.

CITIES AND TOWNS

A Song of Ice and Fire by George RR Martin
The Lord of the Rings by JRR Tolkien
Avatar: The Last Airbender
Speaker for the Dead by Orson Scott Card
Oathsworn: Into the Deepwood
The Stormlight Archives by Brandon Sanderson
Dune by Frank Herbert
The Diamond Age by Neal Stephenson
The Elder Scrolls
Children of Time by Adrian Tchaikovsky
Snow Crash by Neal Stephenson
Cloudpunk
Altered Carbon by Richard Morgan
Diaspora by Greg Egan

Whether you're designing a fictional world for your book, your tabletop game, or just for the fun of it, you probably want to take your characters on an immersive journey full of colourful towns and cities grounded in reality —or more importantly, take the reader or player through them. This leaves us with questions. Where should cities and towns go on the map? What shape should they take? What decides where large population centres sprout and grow, and how might those things change in a world adjacent to our own with its own rules, magic, and social dimensions?

Settlements, towns, and cities have sprung up and died for different reasons across history as different economic, political, religious, and social forces have demanded different things. In this chapter, we will split the world into five eras and go through the reasons cities and towns might thrive or die in the ancient era, pre-industrial era, industrial era, post-industrial era, and the future era.

The ancient era

The history of humanity could be described as the history of energy management. At first, our only way of harvesting food, water, and other supplies was expending our own energy in back-breaking labour. Tools of increasing complexity became energy multipliers, allowing us to accomplish more in a shorter time with less effort than before. Eventually, multipliers went beyond handheld tools and into infrastructure and workload organisation—namely, agriculture. Archeologically, many of our ancient cities have been lost to history, leaving little of their original structures and obscuring their purpose, but we can tell a lot by their location and environment. Our first cities popped up for several reasons, but agriculture was chief among them.

Mesopotamia and the Levant are referred to as the 'Fertile Crescent', the former having given rise to Babylon, Akkad, and Ashur—some of our first cities. It should come as no surprise the region follows the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which provided fertile farmland to grow crops and establish a permanent living space as early as 4000 BCE. The name Mesopotamia even means 'between two rivers' in Greek. While the region today is partly arid and inhospitable to a lot of dense agriculture, this was not always the case. Likewise, and perhaps even more importantly, the Huang He Valley saw the rise of early Chinese civilisations on the banks of China's second longest river as early as 2100 BCE. It created a drainage basin of over 750,000 square kilometres, frequently overflowing and fostering fertile land for rice crops.

The Nile served a similar purpose, with Egypt seeing the rise of some of the world's most powerful ancient civilisations for thousands of years. The Indus River Valley Civilisation—covering parts of modern-day India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan—has evidence of complex city planning, sewage systems, and of course, extensive agricultural projects. It was only with the Saraswati River drying out, and the loss of that agricultural potential, that civilisation there collapsed, forcing migration. Other similar places have been found in Mesoamerica and South America.

In each of these cases, concentrated urban areas grew to organise agricultural projects involving permanent crop yields as opposed to whatever could be hunted and gathered. Projects of this scale could not be

accomplished with a nomadic lifestyle or by small numbers of people, so they gathered together and settled in one place. This kind of large-scale agriculture requires a lot of fresh water, so all these notable civilizations developed along large rivers.

We can see this sort of thinking in George RR Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, where humans once again prove their creativity by naming the oldest town in Westeros 'Oldtown'. Oldtown, much like our ancient cities, is built around a broad freshwater river which creates some of the most fertile land on the continent, capable of easily supporting large crop harvests. The Reach, the region in which Oldtown is found, is regularly referred to as the 'breadbasket of the Seven Kingdoms', much like modern-day Ukraine is called the 'breadbasket of Europe'. However, it's worth noting an early settlement doesn't need to pop up in the most optimal place your world has to offer, only one favourable enough to support a comparatively growing, permanent population.

Sometimes this is reduced to 'cities show up next to rivers' in worldbuilding, but it's more geologically complex than that. Ukraine is the third largest exporter of barley and rapeseed, fourth largest exporter of corn, and fifth largest exporter of wheat, owing to it having a quarter of the world's most fertile soil—a specific kind of soil known as chernozem. Chernozem is packed full of humus, phosphorus, and ammonia compounds, making it nutrient rich and allowing it to store a lot of moisture, and it demonstrates that freshwater rivers are not the only geological factors dictating where humans might decide to first settle. This is not that early humans would *know* what chernozem was, only that experimenting with crops there yields greater results. You can also tell the difference simply looking at it or touching it, which is how characters in your stories may primarily interact with the world. It's notably black and moist, contrasting with the light-coloured, dry sand of a desert.

Your world may have other geological factors involved, as well. Shifting leylines might criss-cross your world, creating moving regions of magically invigorated land. Your world might be primarily oceans, leading to crops of seaweed or other water-plants, and those might demand entirely different geological conditions. Rivers don't guarantee easy land to farm or settle in. Elevation, soil quality, climate, and the surrounding landscape all affect whether we might settle down.

Fresh water is necessarily an important resource at all times, but it's important to recognise the different ways this can manifest. Hervé Reculeau, associate professor of Assyriology at the University of Chicago, points that in Upper Mesopotamia, the rainfall and local resources were reliable enough that their agriculture and development could be organised on a local level without the supervision of large-scale state structures. On the other hand, Lower Mesopotamia faced less predictable rivers and flooding, requiring a greater degree of irrigation, and therefore social complexity. The Nile's flooding has been so seasonally reliable the Egyptians invented the nilometer to record the level of a flood, and then because society and prosperity were so closely tied to this, the recorded levels would be used to calculate crop yields and taxes. In *Dune,* the desert world is devoid of rivers or lakes, and Fremen towns are instead centred around huge deposits of water drawn up from deep underground, all part of a sacred mission to turn the planet green.

The Nile in Egypt, the Ganges in India, and the Yellow River in China (which connects to the Huang He Valley) end in deltas, meaning they split into several channels as they head towards the coast. Deltas are a common place for civilisations to flourish because they give access to flat land, provide easily irrigated freshwater sources, deposit huge amounts of nutrient-rich sediment, give access to fish, and in the long term, give rise to sea trade. Flat land isn't just good for water and crops, but also building, travel, and communication as well. Different places or projects may rely on one of these factors more.

One fictional example would be that of JRR Tolkien's Pelargir, a city built on the delta at the end of the Anduin. A perfect place to trade with other states down the coast and well-situated strategically, Pelargir also borders Lebennin, a fiefdom otherwise called 'Fair Lebennin of the Five Streams' for its many rivers streaming down from the mountains. This created a wealth of arable land with regular, dependable freshwater, a delta that deposits nutrient-rich sediment, and predictable seasons. It's no surprise the earliest Gondorian settlements and outposts cropped up in this region.

As a worldbuilder, ask yourself: where is fresh water? Where is good fertile land? If a river splits into a delta, how does this change where the city grows? What other geological factors make seasons or crop growth more reliable and predictable? Which challenges can large-scale state structures overcome? These often, though not always, coincide. A lack of

flooding, undependable rain cycles, and erosion-prone regions like mountains can all give rise to nutrient-poor soil even with a lot of fresh water.

New Zealand suffers from this exact problem: it has a lot of water but only two percent arable land. The underlying factors here are *regularity* and *predictability.* If a civilisation is willing to give up its lifestyle to depend on the environment from year to year, including giving up a part of their harvest to plant crops for the following year, then the dependability of the weather and environment is critical. Alternatively, fish has long been a source of dependable and predictable food, and cities will often gravitate towards areas with them, which means rivers, lakes, and coastlands.

Volcanoes have played a surprising role in the growth of ancient settlements—some of which have long been buried for obvious reasons. Volcanoes give rise to extremely fertile soil, making settling near them tempting, but they're also vulnerable to disaster. Cuicuilco was an ancient Mesoamerican city built around the wetlands of what is now modern-day Mexico City, but it was also set against the Popocatépetl volcano, which destroyed it in a series of eruptions. Likewise, you're likely familiar with the fate of Pompeii in ancient Rome. Perhaps volcanoes have given rise to short-lived civilisations in your world, being as quickly destroyed as they grow.

As with any fictional world, there might be a myriad of other reasons for cities to grow, but those are for you to determine.

The systemic organisation of work

Built into the growth of early civilisations is a shift from everybody gathering food and water to a society with a labouring class and a managerial class to direct that labour—the first real class structure. This requires a larger population, and thus more workable land and water, but more importantly, it rises out of population-dense economic and social projects. Anyone can farm, but it takes a massive group of well-organised labourers to properly develop complex irrigation systems to efficiently use the water, maximise the return on crop-yields, harvest the grain, and preserve it all in enough time. This is economies of scale, saving energy by increasing and coordinating production better.

The other side of the coin is disaster management. Protecting crop yields from damage is just as important as creating greater harvests. Projects like dams, bridges, and drainage all worked to protect a crop, and all required a higher degree of labour organisation than previously existed. If the freshwater largely comes from rain, then what infrastructure might be required to catch and preserve rainwater? If the fresh water comes from a delta, then what irrigation systems might help, and what kind of irrigation would the crop grown there require? Rice, barley, rapeseed, and wheat all demand different infrastructure.

Agricultural projects might spark our first settlements, but other projects might lead to further evolution of the state or kingdom. In 486BCE, King Fuchai of the State of Wu ordered a canal to be built connecting the Yangtze and Huai Rivers, increasing trade and allowing military expansion. There are a lot of reasons a higher degree of centralisation might be required beyond the initial reasons for a settlement to grow. Perhaps they can only harvest a resource with larger groups of people, or they need to build a defensive wall to keep out the monsters who come at night, or they decide to build a pyramid to the skies as a way of appeasing the gods. Even something as simple as roads for animals who haul carts and ploughs can be an important society-shaping feature. What kind of projects might require a more systemic organisation of work in your world?

Religious sites and hierarchies

When discussing the systemic organisation of work, the topic can't be separated from who is doing the *organising* and who is doing the *labouring*. Religion and ritual have always been major reasons for people to congregate as forces of social cohesion, regimentation, and cultural bonding. Seasons, regular flooding, rainfall, and sunlight—the things agriculture depends on—are often ritualised, deified, and combined with religion. As a result, this is a bit of a chicken-and-egg situation. Was religious attachment endowed to favourable elements because of its capacity to sustain a settlement, or did a permanent population grow in a location because of it possessed features of religious significance? Both

things can be true. This gets even more complex in a fictional world where we know the gods are real and influential.

The consequence of this intermingling of the practical and theological is the ‘organiser’ class usually consisted of religious leaders or religious trappings were conferred on the organisers. While today we may be accustomed to the separation of church and state, that line gets blurrier the further back you go. Early kings, pharaohs, and elsewise founded their power in the divine forces of the world. One mythological figure, Yu the Great, supposedly demonstrated how to control the floods in the Huang He Valley—perhaps with a system of dams and drainage—and is credited as the first ruler of the Xia Dynasty. Ancient Egypt had a concept called Ma’at—cosmic balance and harmony—and if the land was disrupted by famine, drought, or other agricultural failures, it could be attributed to the pharaoh’s failure to uphold Ma’at. This didn’t necessarily make ancient societies theocracies in the way we might imagine them now, but points more to how ancient civilisations did not see a significant distinction between someone responsible for the existential concerns of a society—life, death, justice, and balance—and their material concerns.

The Sun Warrior city in ‘The Firebending Masters’, an episode of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, was founded around the homes of ancient dragons, creatures critical to their economic development but equally religiously important symbols of life, light, honour, power, and prosperity. The immense stonework of pyramids and mountain shrines present in the city must have required huge amounts of coordinated labour, but their architectural design shows how inseparable they were from their religious framework. Those who communed with the dragons were given power. The city’s economic potential and religious significance drew people in, which in turn reinforced the religious hierarchy which was already in place. If human history is one of energy management, magic is another way of increasing our output not only agriculturally, but militarily and intellectually. A magical region, even if agriculturally desolate, may provide other opportunities and attract settlements. The Sun Warrior city was founded on an inhospitable island chain, but access to powerful magic made survival easier.

Exactly what form the organiser class might take will vary. How does that class of people carry over to the current day of your story? If religious positions came with this power, then consider how their responsibilities

reflect the environmental demands of the region. On the other hand, think about religious trappings and other cultural practices emerging as social complexity increases. These can be reflected in the architecture, layout, or materials used in your city.

Perhaps your fictional world operates on entirely different assumptions. Humans can't eat grass and require huge amounts of fresh water to survive. We cannot fly and are naturally social beings. Even our lifecycle has assumptions built into it about how food needs to be harvested, preserved, and used.

In Orson Scott Card's *Speaker for the Dead,* the pequeninos are a race of furry, pig-like creatures who naturally evolved in city-like structures from the beginning because of how their lifecycle works. There was no nomadic phase. When they 'die', they become trees which help fertilise and produce their young as well as provide building materials for future generations. They can't migrate very easily because their people are literally rooted in the earth and equivalent resources are rare. Their cities are forests, and their resources are people. Agriculture does help one 'city' expand rapidly, but the point remains that this species had vitally different primal concerns to humans. Their biology and lifecycle create a natural hierarchy ours does not. Their 'wives' are especially vulnerable, and the strange relationship they have with death and their environment means harvesting materials takes on a uniquely religious connotation. Their incentive to settle in one place is very different to ours, and playing with economies of scale would mean something very different to them—morally and socially.

Figure out the base assumptions and primal concerns your species or culture might have. How does their biology change their demands on the environment? What do they fear from their environment that would encourage city-building? What do they need in their lives that a city might provide? These answers might decide where cities *began* but not where they thrived or endured. Only a handful of cities across the world have been consistently inhabited for thousands of years, largely because new pressures and opportunities have caused people to move as times change.

The pre-industrial era

It's important to note cities and towns continued to pop up for religious, organisational, and agricultural purposes, especially as different regions around the world developed at different speeds, but new reasons came along during the pre-industrial era, the most important of which was trade. The world was becoming more interconnected. Agriculture meant excess resources could be traded for other materials—metal, obsidian, different kinds of food, spices, clothing, and more. New cities continued to spring up alongside rivers, oceans, and lakes, not only because they provided food sources, but because shipping was the fastest and often safest way to transport goods around the world. Cities became a way to increase your standard of living.

Once a region has a few settlements established, we find trade routes naturally pop up along the paths of least resistance, be it following rivers, through valleys, or over the shortest mountain. The Silk Road was not a single road but a network stretching across Asia and through to Europe. As it grew in popularity, towns like Kashgar and Merv popped up to capitalise on the number of people reliably moving through the region, even if they weren't naturally suited to agriculture. Trade became a new way to sustain a permanent population. Consider where towns might pop up along major trade routes, either to provide breaks along the journey or to shorten trade between major producers into more manageable segments. To return to Westeros, the Crossroads Inn and its surrounding settlement naturally evolved at the intersection of the Kingsroad running north to south and River Road running west to east. The major junction saw people from all directions bringing trade, information, and income. This is still the regularity and predictability we talked about before, just of a different ilk.

However, as with the case of *Speaker for the Dead,* your world might work on entirely different assumptions. Perhaps water routes are not the safest nor quickest ways to travel because they are teeming with large, aggressive wildlife. If characters can fly, use portals, or hyperjump from location to location, junctions might be much less important or different, and people may migrate further distances much quicker. In *Oathsworn: Into the Deepwood*, the world is covered in a dense, inhospitable forest full of monsters, making trade virtually impossible. Cities develop where they are

defensible. A world where people sail across deserts like in *Dune* would spark wholly different technologies. A world with unpredictable winds and water currents would change where people can go. All of these would in turn change where wealth is found and how trade moves, and thus where cities grow. Civilisation no longer looks just to agriculture and water but new resources and skills to improve their standard of living. Which resources and skills those are will depend on the unique obstacles, geography, and incentives your world presents.

One underestimated aspect of this shift is wealth. Luxury resources travel very differently to basic goods. Much like flying in a private jet, portal travel might only be available to the wealthy and powerful while the lower classes are left to use slower methods with less reach. You can network your world in this way, mapping out how far which resources can go and what kind of economy settlements along the way might have. Figure out which settlements produce luxury resources, where they're traded, and where the basic resources come from. Slowly, you build out a network not just of towns and cities, but where wealth, people, and power are moving.

Fall lines

Fall lines are characterised by two different types of land meeting—usually foothills and coastal plains—and a significant drop in elevation, giving rise to waterfalls or rapids. Humans have long relied on the power of falling water, from ancient mills to hydropower dams today. Pre-industrial cities built on fall lines facilitated economic growth and trade as they marked a natural point of transition between navigable coastal rivers and the less navigable mountain waters. They also sparked settlements further in from the coast. People would often get on or off boats at these points, giving it a reliable population flow. Rivers naturally connected them to larger cities near the coast while the elevation gave them access to resources like iron or tin. Steep drops in height also afforded these areas a defensive advantage if needed. Some examples include Hartford in Connecticut, Laufenberg in Switzerland, and Dinant in Belgium. Each of these went on to become important trading hubs in their time.

This is not saying you need to figure out where your continents bump up against each other, only that we started to see settlements pop up along falls

more as waterways became more important routes for travel and trade played a larger part in how cities related to one another.

City states

Before the nation state, even before kingdom or empire, was the city state. These would often grow in population, wealth, and power until increasing social complexity and steeper hierarchies necessitated or justified expansion for a greater command of resources. This could either involve extending their influence over surrounding territories or levying their position to gain concessions and tribute without exercising direct political control over them. Athens did precisely this with the Delian League. How you approach this expansion of influence depends on how you want your cities to evolve. Excess resources and wealth allow for more organised military expansion. Which city states or people groups will find it easier to develop a more unified body-politic, and which places might the powers of your world be incentivised to expand into? A world becoming more interconnected also means alliances, enemies, and tensions over land and resources.

City states and microstates have a long history of being swallowed up by their bigger, beefier neighbors, especially during the colonial period. Some maintained their independence by being isolated—such as Andorra and Lichtenstein—while others have maintained their independence with diplomatic savvy. The Vatican, situated inside Rome, is respected as an independent country owing to its significance as the seat of the Catholic Church, the largest religious organisation in the world. This is not necessarily out of the kindness of Italy's heart, but because having such a significant institution within its borders gives it some sway and also allows it to wash its hands of any scandals. San Marino has maintained its independence with undeterred neutrality.

City states are often commerce powerhouses, and they thrive in fractured political environments where no force can be mustered to swallow them all up. As a result, city states and microstates develop strong cultural identities despite their size, often in contrast to their surrounding neighbours. Microstates like the Republic of Palau and Tuvalu have emerged from the colonial period with the decline of British influence. In this way, you might

imagine city states as the products of early state building, fractured political environments, and colonial fallout.

Colonial powers sometimes forced coastal towns to become 'independent' city states as a way of facilitating trade outside of the home country's jurisdiction. These city states were designed to deepen colonial control and, in many cases, precipitate full colonisation. During the Edo Period, Japan had an artificial island called Deijima where the Dutch East India Company could do business with the Japanese. It enjoyed a degree of autonomy and special administrative status to maintain Japan's isolationist policies. The Dutch would never *technically* set foot in Japan. In 1824, the British pressed a weakened Sultan Hussein into handing over Singapore, a city state from which Britain could project power and extract resources from the region. In this way, you can imagine colonial city states not just as expressions of political will but tools of political leverage. What terms might the powers of your world want to extract and who from?

Kharbranth from *The Stormlight Archives* is something of a model worldbuilding city state. Perfectly situated for trade on the coast of Roshar and along a major trade route connecting two sides of the continent, it is also incredibly defensible, set inside the wedge of a canyon, keeping it safe not only from other nations but the devastating high storms that ravage the continent. It is protected by the Frostlands to its back, a wild area controlled by nobody. Its leaders are known for their diplomatic savvy and a complex web of alliances—though the events of the books prove it to be involved with covert espionage on the world stage.

Specialisation

With surplus agricultural yields, not everyone in a society needs to be involved in some sort of farming. This leads to a class of people who can specialise in more niche skills, such as baking, peddling, sewing, soldiering, leading, and blacksmithing. New professions emerge. New skills and goods create demand for new resources as living standards rise. Gemstones, metals, leather, more complex tools, even art and paper give reasons for settlements to grow in places they did not before, providing those materials and supporting this next tier of lifestyle. Over time, cities become enmeshed in this web of interdependent buds of civilisation all relying on trade from

each other to provide goods they do not produce on their own. The town of Kremnica in Slovakia popped up in the ninth century to mine the Kremnica Mountains for gold—an incredibly valuable resource as currency and jewellery rose in demand in the region. This sort of town would not have been possible unless trade brought it food and clothing.

In Frank Herbert's *Dune*, the city of Arrakeen on the planet Arrakis is an even more extreme example of this. The city grew to harvest the Spice, a psychoactive drug essential for space travel and which endows its user with prescient powers. However, the planet is a desert with almost no water for proper irrigation or large-scale agriculture. The city's survival depends largely on imports from other planets, only possible because the Spice the most valuable resource ever found and is only found on Arrakis.

Think about what your cities might specialise in, even in small ways, and which resources might lead to new settlements and towns which weren't possible before. Consider what this new tier of lifestyle might look like in your world, and the demands and incentives it would create. In this way, you can imagine towns and cities in terms of what they provide to or need from nearby, or perhaps distant, places.

In our world, it simply wasn't viable to harvest some resources for a long time, and as a result, towns didn't pop up near them. Some were too deep in the earth, too expensive to extract, or too circumstantial to be worth extracting. In other cases, we lacked the technology to extract them or didn't understand what was there. Alum as a compound has been used historically for dyeing, medicine, or creating fire-resistant materials, but it wasn't until 1825 that it was developed into what we now call aluminium—one of the most widely used materials on Earth. This relatively late development in metallurgy is largely because aluminium is found trapped in other ores, and we didn't have the knowledge to reduce its base compound till then. Soon after, towns grew to mine it. In contrast to this, people in Brandon Sanderson's *The Stormlight Archives* managed to do this far earlier in their technological development, and aluminium serves a much wider range of purposes in their world than it does in ours because it blocks a plethora of magical abilities. This extra economic incentive and earlier scientific development means cities likely grew to support alum mining earlier than they did here.

Consider which resources might be more readily accessible, cheaper to extract, earlier understood, or might have an ulterior purpose in your world

than what we might otherwise be familiar with. All this affects where people travel, how they live, and where wealth can be found—and thus where cities develop. Which materials are in demand will also shift and change with the pressures of the time. New technologies will bring materials into demand which were previously considered useless. Lithium was rarely used until we learned how vital it was for electronics, and now hundreds of lithium towns have sprung up to harvest it.

However, it also goes the other way: the materials available can shape how we live. In Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age,* diamonds are cheap and widely available, meaning people create whole suits of diamond body armour while common machinery uses them for extraordinarily precise work. This kind of abundance of something we consider rare makes for an entirely different kind of material society. Conversely, what if something we considered common were rare? A scarcity of coal might set a world back hundreds of years, a city with the only known coal deposit might be incredibly rich, or burning coal may have never occurred to the people of that world because there's so little of it.

The Roman Empire toyed with steam power, and while it wasn't *close* to using it on a wide scale, it's not inconceivable to imagine steam power being developed centuries earlier than it did. There's nothing to say technology would develop the same way in your world, and this might radically change where people live. As a worldbuilder, consider what materials are in demand and might give rise to new settlements, but more than that, consider what materials were *historically* in demand but have since fallen out of fashion.

This new tier of lifestyle also gives rise to more reasons for people to live somewhere, such as leisure resorts, universities, military encampments, and political establishments. While these would naturally evolve near already existing population centres, they might also lead to wholly new settlements in places which would not otherwise have evolved. Excess wealth and taxes allow a state to support specialized or even superfluous settlements for strategic, cultural, propagandistic, or political purposes.

Persepolis was the ceremonial capital of the Achaemenid Empire, built by Darius I. Before this, the empire's capitals were cities like Babylon, Susa, and Ecbatana, each strategically situated and more economically viable. Persepolis was remotely located in a mountainous region, but Darius I had it expanded as a propagandistic show of the empire's prosperity and

his authority. Being a new centre of power brought people to it, and it grew despite its disadvantages.

Specialisation is not just the result of nearby resources but active government policy, culture, ideological framework, technological development, and even chance. A city might specialise in weapons manufacturing, financial management, religious training, or any other field requiring high investment, advanced infrastructure, complex logistics, or skilled labour. For example, how many times have you seen the ‘magical university’ trope?

However, it’s important to note how gradual a shift this was. The globalised and highly specialised economy we know today is an incredibly new system. It’s dependent on the rise of fossil fuels, the twentieth century population boom, the Internet, and economic theories which until recently would have been regarded as radical. While the colonial period saw *huge* amounts of wealth and resources transported around the world—predominantly from Africa and Asia to Europe—the amount traded pales in comparison to what we see now. For most of history, long distance trade was limited to very specific and expensive resources, and even if they specialised in something, most cities still acquired a lot of their basic goods—grain, meat, and the like—from nearby agricultural regions. Regional trade, however, was much more common. Of course, magic, special technology, or quirks of your world may negate any of these elements and make globalised trade and specialisation much easier.

Political centralisation

The pre-industrial era also saw the rise of new political entities as city states expanded beyond their borders, often merging with other city states and even emerging as empires. This expansion required a higher degree of political centralisation both organisationally and geographically. The capital of the Mongol Empire between 1235 and 1260 was Karakorum, a religiously important site as the centre for a several shamanistic and Tengrism rituals, but more importantly, it was the geographical centre of the Mongolian home territory in the Orkhon Valley. At the time, physical distance was important for efficient governance, communication, resource allocation, and military movements. This is also part of why the capital of

the Roman Empire moved from Rome to Byzantium in 330CE. Not only did Emperor Constantine want to be strategically located on the Bosporus Strait connecting the Black Sea and Mediterranean, both of which were vital for trade, but the eastern borders were becoming increasingly more volatile. Being closer to that frontline allowed for more direct control.

Once more though, this may be operating on several assumptions which don't apply in your fictional world. The ability to teleport, transmit information over vast distances, apply force over distance, or sophisticated federal systems all diminish the need for physical centralisation. In the world of Tamriel from the *Elder Scrolls* video games, a species of lizardfolk called the Argonians live in tandem with the Hist—a kind of eldritch tree they rely on, serve, and protect. The Argonians can communicate telepathically to them, and the Hist can coordinate across their realm on a psycho-spiritual level, facilitating a decentralized society. Blackmarsh is the only region in Tamriel without a clear capital city. Part of this is because the Argonians don't rely on agriculture the way humans do, but it's also made possible by this system of relaying information. They can coordinate, send messages, and exert force over long distances, so they naturally have a decentralised political structure.

One of the most fascinating books I've ever read is *Diaspora* by Greg Egan. It's set in the distant future where much of life exists on a planet called Orphan, which rotates so slowly that people must constantly migrate to stay in a narrow habitable band of twilight they call the 'Gyre'. On one side is extreme cold and the other intense heat. As they migrate, they pass by the ruins of previous attempts at cities. Structures are nearly always temporary. The idea of city-formation in any familiar way is just impossible. Think outside the assumptions made about our world.

The industrial era

With Brian McClellan's *The Crimson Campaign*, Brandon Sanderson's *Mistborn,* and Django Wexler's *A Thousand Names*, the industrial era is an increasingly popular setting for fantasy fiction these days. The industrial era not only introduced a plethora of new reasons for towns to grow and die, but vastly changed city life with the steepest intensification of urban living in history.

Thousands of boomtowns (named for the economic boom that spurred them) sprung up, sometimes overnight, as new coal and fuel reserves were discovered—necessary to propel the revolution forward. If we view history through the management of energy, then burning coal was a comparatively unassisted energy source carrying a thousand times the power of a slowly turning watermill. Boomtowns would also often die as quickly as they grew. Often located in inhospitable, barren, and distant locations, the main draw was the money, so when the money dried up, people stopped coming.

Consider what resources are propelling your civilisation into its industrial era and where those resources would be found. Are they at the bottom of rivers? Consider what damning the river does to the surrounding region. Can they be found deep in the mountains? Think about the quality of life and increased risks of living in such an inhospitable place, especially given the industrial era wasn't exactly known for its labour protections or health and safety regulations. If a resource like iron or coal requires refining, then nearby cities might adapt to accommodate that, shifting away from what they previously specialised in. New junctions are created in the trade network, giving rise to more towns at these points of intersection, especially as railways or other modes of transportation develop.

One marked difference the industrial era shepherded in was the mobility of the average worker. It is largely a myth that lower class workers never travelled in the ancient world, but the industrial era saw them travel further and more than ever before. Railways didn't just mean travel was faster, but it was *cheaper* as well. This meant higher levels of linguistic and cultural exchange, greater economic opportunity, and a growing middle class. They not only allow the characters to explore the world in ways never possible before but allow for the sharing of more resources at greater distances. With more efficient modes of transportation, economies become more integrated. This means cities become less about sociological expressions of the ruling class and more about the tangled lives of the working man. The urban environment brings different factions and demographics in society closer together than ever before.

We have already explored how trade allows for specialisation, but railways put that on steroids. Whole cities dedicate themselves not simply to manufacturing, but a specific type of manufacturing with a specific material. The interconnectedness railways afford a region diversifies the

goods and services available, increases living standards, and in turn creates a hotbed for political change. Everything is simply moving a lot faster.

The key thing to focus on here is efficient transportation. Canals are underrepresented in fiction given the massive role they have played historically. Countries all around the world dug out thousands of kilometres of canals to network their cities, making trade, travel, and communication faster. Rivers also aren't dependent on fossil fuels like coal or oil, meaning they popped up a long time before the industrial revolution—though they were used heavily during it, as well, and still are today.

Population shift

During the industrial revolution, new agricultural technologies eliminated rural jobs while cities promised economic opportunity. Huge numbers of people not only moved from rural areas to cities during the industrial era, but *where* those cities were growing changed. Whether a city thrived wasn't just tied to whether it was politically central, religiously important, or positioned for trade, but to its industrial capacity.

Industry and machinery may mean something entirely different to your world. In Adrian Tchaikovsky's *Children of Time*, a spider civilisation undergoes something of an industrial revolution when they start using ant colonies—yes, ant colonies— as *computers*. Cities are built over top of them in a similar way to cities being built over fuel deposits. Instead of miners, the spiders employ ant programmers who engineer pheromones to get the ants to do as they're told. Those which capitalised on this thrived, but it also meant there wasn't a drive to exploit fossil fuels. They could accomplish similar things in their own way.

Manchester is a great example of how quickly this kind of economic shift can change a city. It grew from a small town of twenty-seven thousand to nearly one hundred thousand in just twenty-five years, elevating its status to a major city in the United Kingdom. It was near significant coal reserves in Lancashire, was already situated on a series of navigable waterways which made exports easy, and it adopted several technological innovations before other regions did, such as the spinning jenny and power loom.

The growth of cities in the industrial era reflected new resources, new technologies, and economic opportunity for the working and middle class.

There was also a decline in the traditional top-down hierarchy as controlling swaths of arable land was no longer as important as controlling fuel deposits or owning productive factories, giving business owners as much power or more than lords and kings. While the ruling class transitioned to new modes of wealth and ownership, becoming owners and landlords, the shape of the ruling class changed with that. One interesting worldbuilding conflict is figuring out how this older class adapts to these new economic realities. Do they fight the shift? Which factions within survive and which become irrelevant, and how do they respond to their irrelevance?

More than anything, an industrial revolution means change, and this isn't limited to factories and coal mines. As cities grew and developed, rural areas were forced to adapt or simply declined. Both sides saw a huge shift in how their economy worked and how they related to each other. This might create a lot of tension, seeing whole communities decimated, the environment ruined, their ethos challenged, and their local culture lost to the rapidly changing social and economic norms. Cities also reflect culture in things like the style of their architecture, who populates the city market, and the colours and design on their coat of arms. Don't forget to consider how these things change as your cities go through an industrial revolution.

The post-industrial era

Cities have changed a lot since the industrial revolution, perhaps less in the reasons they crop up and grow and more in their precise makeup. Many have diversified into a knowledge-based economy with space for services, technology, creative industries, and online industries, while manufacturing has often shifted abroad. Globalisation has seen specialisation taken to an even higher level. New Zealand has shifted to be a major dairy exporter on the world market while remaining dependent on other countries like China for a lot of its cheaper material goods.

Urbanisation has not only continued but accelerated with sixty-eight percent of the world's population predicted to be urbanized by 2050, with that number much higher in highly developed countries already.

Urban planning has shifted as a result. Historically, cities were often designed in symbolic ways with a keener eye paid to the impression a ruler wanted to give. Kyoto was first drawn up to be symbolically representative

of the class system in Japan, while other cities have religious symbolism built into them as places of cultural importance. Logistically, this just isn't as possible these days unless we're looking at cities like Ashgabat, home to a crazy dictator with too much oil money. How cities look and develop is much more decentralised, planned around people management, environmental concerns, creating liveable spaces and green areas, developing transport networks, and fostering economic growth.

Cities thrive for different reasons too. Manufacturing, religious importance, and even being the seat of power matter a lot less. Wealth is instead tied to stock exchanges, reputable financial institutions, strong regulatory and legal systems, and technologically advanced infrastructure. Trade also means something very different today than it did historically. While there are more small businesses than ever, wealth inequality is at an all-time high with corporations growing exponentially. Perhaps the starkest identifier of modern cities is the wealth divide, represented by towers in the centre city, dilapidated buildings on the fringes, and sprawling middle class suburbs beyond. While this distinction can be found throughout every era, it has become ever more pronounced in the modern day.

Even so, it's critical to understand that 'how cities look' is just as much a product of economic policy and cultural values as it is technological advancement and social complexity. There's no inevitability to how cities might evolve. The Soviet Union understood city design very differently, as do many other socialist countries today. European cities are built much more densely than in the United States, in part because Europe is much more densely populated and has a long history of building over what came before, but also because the United States possesses a very different economic mindset. They place more emphasis on the individual homeowner and land ownership as an expression of wealth. While we imagine green space as mostly clipped lawns of grass, there is every reason to believe these could instead be orchards or wildflower fields. A cohabitative rather than exploitative ethos regarding our environment might have led cities to build around forests rather than through them. A different path of technological development might make industrial development quicker, cleaner, less population-dense, or more intense.

Beyond that, there's an almost infinite amount of complexity to the shape cities take through every era of history. It's because of this I've tried

to focus more on the where and why cities grow, thrive, and die. These are tendencies and questions to think about, not blueprints.

The future era

Science fiction has been trying to predict the future since its inception. Coal changed how cities smelled, worked, and the lives people lived there. The internet decentralised small businesses and changed how closely we identify with our city or region. Instead, we identify with online communities, finding support—financial and personal—in places we never have before. A new technology—perhaps artificial intelligence—might do something similar someday. Science fiction like *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson has long explored virtual space, our relationship with it, living inside it, and how it affects our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Virtual space requires none of the infrastructure we associate with cities and trade and even introduces the possibility of virtual, intangible goods, but it's also a place to meet, exchange ideas, and build communities. Is this not a city in its own way?

The pandemic has seen a huge shift towards remote work. This might lead to a change in how cities are built—away from the 'hub' of a central workspace to something new we haven't seen before.

It is up to you to imagine what new resources might drive us to new locations, what social trends and desires might see the city change, what economic forces might shift where population centres are. The cyberpunk genre warns us of growing corporate power. *Altered Carbon* by Richard Morgan imagines monolithic megastructures in cities owned by corporations where the poor work for what little they can get in the squalor down below. Ion Lands' *Cloudpunk* imagines cities as nigh-infinite mazes of megastructures built in so many layers that the sun never reaches the lowest levels. In these stories, wealth disparity only increases and crystallises.

When we take to worldbuilding, we often start out with the impression that cities or towns will be wherever is most immediately efficient. This is not always the case. Cities rise and fall for a thousand reasons, but if they already have momentum, population, wealth, and influence, then the chances of them totally collapsing into nothing is slim. They might decline

but can often adapt well enough to new forces. A town built for its agricultural capacity might become a manufacturing hub even though it's not close to a source of raw materials because it already has an established workforce and industrial sector. In this way, imagine where your cities are in layers. Cities and towns are built over top of each other, slowly shifting like continents, adapting and flexing as history moves them forward. A city always rises out of a pre-existing historical context that abstracts it from whatever it appears to specialise in or provide at the time of your story.

Summary

1. Ancient settlements often grew around freshwater sources and fertile soil, especially river deltas. However, these manifested in several different ways. The underlying factors are the predictability and reliability of the water and soil.
2. Ancient cities grew around the systemic organisation of work, giving rise to the first class structures as they built dams, irrigation projects, sewage systems, and the like. The organiser class often crossed over with religious leaders. Just because agriculture might lead to the first cities, other projects might lead to the further evolution of the state.
3. Your world may operate on a whole series of sociological or biological assumptions that do not apply to humans. Use them. Question whether we need the same things or face the same obstacles, and how those differences could be used to create a more unique world.
4. Trade gave rise to new settlements, both along trade routes and as sources of new materials. People and towns specialized as they became part of a more interdependent network. Fall lines often end up being important points in this network.
5. City states and microstates are often defensible, reliant on commerce, have special legal, trade, or religious status, and can be used in ploys by other powers.
6. The industrial era gave rise to boomtowns and railway towns. Railways saw a huge increase in trade, cultural exchange, and population exchange over further distances. It also saw a shift from

rural to urban as jobs were eliminated and created. Consider which cities are near industrial resource deposits, how well situated they are as a transport hub, and how this changes the character of a city.

7. Urbanisation has continued into the modern era, and urban planning has changed as a result. While there are more small businesses than ever, wealth inequality is at an all-time high, and this divide can be seen vividly in a city's layout.
8. There is no guarantee any city would have turned out in any particular way. This evolution has come just as much from colonialism, economic theory, cultural value systems, technological development, and chance. Your cities might have turned out entirely different if a different storm of these factors came together.

MOUNTAINS

A Song of Ice and Fire by George RR Martin
Sunless Skies
Avatar: The Last Airbender
The Stormlight Archives by Brandon Sanderson
The Lord of the Rings by JRR Tolkien
Ender's Game by Orson Scott Card
Speaker for the Dead by Orson Scott Card
The Broken Earth by NK Jemisin
Children of Time by Adrian Tchaikovsky
The Elder Scrolls
Dune by Frank Herbert

Famed mountaineer Hermann Buhl once said, 'Mountains have a way of dealing with overconfidence.' Mountains do not move for us. Armies have died to them. Cities rely on them for defence. We live in their shadows. They are a huge part of the architecture of the world we live in. In this chapter, we will discuss three different types of mountain city, how mountains affect the spread of civilisation, how mountains form, and why environmental determinism is bad worldbuilding.

Two types of mountain city

Covering nearly seven-thousand kilometres and stretching from Cape Horn to Central America, the Andes divide South America in two. In Europe, the Alps divide Italy from France, Switzerland, and Germany. The Tien Shan Mountains mark out Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Iran, and more. For most of history, mountain ranges have been the natural stopping point for civilisation for three reasons. First, mountains are a natural buffer against larger armies, making transport often inhospitable or impossible and defence of a region easy. Secondly, exerting force over a mountain range is increasingly difficult, making it more prone to rebellion and independent cultural development. Thirdly, because travel and communication are much

more limited across mountains than flatlands, cultural and economic exchange is typically rarer. A shared history, culture, and narrative is part—certainly not all—of why nations form, and mountains naturally inhibit that down to the minutiae of trade and intermarriage. Different foods, cultural traditions, stories, and struggles will evolve.

We see this thinking in the Red Mountains in George RR Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, which mark the border between Dorne and The Reach. Dorne is famously more politically independent from the Iron Throne after it resisted Aegon's initial conquest of the continent. While other cities stood no chance against dragon fire, the Mountains provided an easy refuge. The dragons could not touch them, and pushing an army through the narrow passes proved costly and difficult.

Their independence is reflected in their culture, as well. While the Dornish do have different roots, the mountains made the smallfolk less likely to travel and intermarry in surrounding territories. Over time, their cultural differences became more pronounced while the rest of the continent mingled. Dornish foods like peppers and oranges became delicacies because of how hard it was to transport them around the continent. Only the rich could afford them. When worldbuilding, you aren't just looking for any mountains, but ones that make conquest, travel, control, trade, and cultural exchange more difficult.

We tend to build cities in the flatlands for a reason. It's easier and cheaper to farm, rivers give fresh water, flat land makes travelling easier, and the ocean gives easy access to food and travel. Population centres follow the flow of people and resources. However, let's talk about two common exceptions.

Resource Cities

What do Park City in Utah, Queenstown in New Zealand, La Riconda in Peru, Lustrum from *Sunless Skies,* and Markarth from *The Elder Scrolls* series, all have in common? They're all resource towns. These kinds of settlements are situated near ample natural resources, such as wood, gold, iron, silver, or magic crystals. Precious resources are often found in mountains because tectonic movements push deposits from deeper in the

ground towards the surface, making them more accessible than they otherwise would be.

Each of these places were set up to harvest a particular resource and have grown and died with the demand of the resource or its depletion in the region. Park City declined to twenty-five percent of its population after the price of silver collapsed in the 1950s and the mine began running out, only saving itself by transforming into a mountain tourist destination—a pattern we also see in Queenstown. The gold-mining boom of the nineteenth century has left countrysides all over scarred with the remains of now long dead communities.

We can apply this to other kinds of resources in our worldbuilding. In *Sunless Skies*, Lustrum only flourished once a crystal capable of manipulating time was found there. They have a saying about the place: 'Lustrum, where you can spend all your hours suffering in hopes of finding more.' Figure out where resource towns might be in your world, which resources your mountains might offer, and the precise relationship these towns have with their resource. Consider where long-dead towns might be found in the mountains after the resource dried up, as well as how some towns adapted to survive.

Sheffield only became a major city in the UK during the Industrial Revolution, quadrupling in size and drawing on its coal and steel production to become an industrial powerhouse. However, the decline of the steel industry in the latter half of the twentieth century led to a rapid economic downturn, and with that, a huge 'brain-drain' as its youth and others sought opportunity elsewhere. Only by diversifying its economy and urban centres did it grow again.

Resource towns heavily intersect with class as well. Their populations tend to be poorer, seeking work in more dangerous professions because they lack the opportunity, skills, or money to look elsewhere. Sulfur miners in Indonesia work in an active volcano in desolate, toxic conditions for around fifteen USD per day because there are few other jobs in the region. The settlements around the Ijen volcano would not exist without them, or at least not in the form they do. Resource towns are not universally poor, but the profits from valuable mining operations are typically not reinvested in the community, but exported to major cities and corporations who own the mines. This is why resource towns can often persist even when more efficient ways of collecting a resource have been found (as is the case with

sulfur mining in Indonesia); the upfront cost of moving to that more efficient system is often high, so it's usually cheaper to keep paying working-class people to do the job. Sometimes, these places will become 'company towns', where the infrastructure is wholly owned by the mining corporation. This can lead to a nefariously exploitative practice where the workers are paid in company 'scrip', a type of internal currency that can only be spent in the company town, trapping the workers and their families in a cycle of poverty and reliance on the mining company.

Consider the poorer regions of your world and how this type of resource collection would change the economy there. What happens when the resource runs out or a more efficient process is found, and how does the government's response affect the politics there? The working class might unionise and turn to more radical ideologies. A narrative might form about *who* is taking their jobs, shifting their relationship with those in power or sparking prejudice against other groups. Where does the exported wealth go?

Trade Cities

What do Innsbruck in Austria, Nagano in Japan, Leh in India, Deep Den in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, and Taku from *Avatar: The Last Airbender* all have in common? They're all positioned along key trade routes across mountains. Given the difficulty of traversing mountain ranges, people tend to use the same paths through valleys or over smaller mountains. These paths create a natural hub for people, wealth, and resources to pass through, and thus life can be more easily sustained there, even in a less hospitable environment. Unlike resource cities, these are often found at lower elevations in the valleys between mountains, though they often intersect with resource cities.

The Himalayas seem indominable, carving out the border between India and China—the two most populous countries in the world. Within that is a history of trade that gave rise to Leh, the largest city in the disputed Kashmir region. For thousands of years, trade has passed between Tibet, the Indus Valley, India, and China—most notably over the Silk Road that Leh crests. Wealth and people pouring into the valley from four directions made

the natural birthplace for a city. Its position makes Leh a religiously and culturally diverse city with more exchange than other places in India.

Trade route towns grow with the importance of the trade route they sit on, influenced by the types of goods they traffic, the number of people they bring in, their strategic position, and the international relations of the parties trading through them. When worldbuilding a trade-based city, you're not just looking at the city and its location, but the regions around it that feed into it culturally, religiously, economically, and socially. These influences will show up in things like the architecture, food, social interactions, and language. Diversity is a hallmark of these cities.

Because of this, we want to think not only about where trade routes are, but where they would have *once* been. A number of towns and cities thrived along the Silk Road, but as the empires which protected it fell apart, that travel became more dangerous, and the trade died with it. Opening alternative trade routes by sea also made this overland route obsolete. What might cause an established trade route to be abandoned in your world? Relations with a country on the other side of the mountains might decline, political stability protecting travel in the region might decay, or the region might come under new cultural influences. More often, new routes might have been found to transport the same goods. Even today, the vast majority of the world's exports travel by maritime shipping. It's faster, safer, and more efficient. Mountain routes may still be essential for regional or local trade, but if they can be replaced by maritime shipping, they often will. Mountain cities will feel that loss of importance, population, and income.

The advent of global shipping technology and a globalised economy has radically shifted how we move goods, who we move them to, and the price and quality of them. It's far more decentralised than ever before and 'trade cities' don't quite mean what they used to. Instead, we've seen the rise of 'financial hubs' like London, New York, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Shanghai. These cities still rise and thrive on significant investment and huge numbers of people, but they're not necessarily situated along key trade routes in the digital age. Brandon Sanderson offers an interesting thought experiment in *The Stormlight Archives.* In this world, soulcasting allows magic-users to create food, water, metal, and even medicine with relative ease. It could theoretically allow cities to grow in places that would be otherwise impossible, not requiring a connection to trade routes. Instead, trade routes may prioritise strategic or religious locations. While mountain

towns can usually be imagined as part of a traversable network, this sort of technology or magic could make them largely independent.

In a similar vein, cities also develop in strategically important locations. A trade route will simultaneously be the easiest way for an army to access an area, often being furnished with established roads, supplies, and critical defence points. Istanbul (not Constantinople) became a fortress city partly to defend access to the Black Sea, but it was also the hub of a major trade route from east to west. This can be another chicken-or-egg situation. Did the city grow because of the fortifications established there, or were fortifications established because of the population and position? There are a number of these cities in Switzerland. A prominent fictional example is Minas Tirith from *The Lord of the Rings*. It was originally built to guard against the tribes of the mountains to the south, but it grew as those tensions subsided. However, the nearby Osgiliath was naturally the larger of the two cities for a long time, being positioned on the flat, farmable plains and against the Anduin River.

Mountains and gods

While humans endow significance to all sorts of natural formations, we have a long history of associating mountains with the gods or heaven. Some pilgrimages take people up mountains *because* the trek is difficult. People naturally gravitate to centres of power, and these often cross over with places of religious significance. Either way, mountains might play an important psycho-social role in your world as part of the cultural tapestry, and within that, settlements pop up to capitalise on the movement of money and people around it.

When worldbuilding mountain settlements, don't just think about where resources, trade routes, and religious or cultural sites *are* but where they *have been* historically, as the marks of these will always be left over from past civilisations. In *Avatar: The Last Airbender,* the city of Taku lies in utter ruin on the border of the northwest Earth Kingdom territories. Taku was not only originally built along the major trade between the west and east, but it was chosen as one of the only cities in the nation permitted to conduct international trade, enriching it greatly. It was perfectly positioned to channel trade with the Northern Water Tribe. However, after the

northwest territories were conquered by the Fire Nation, that trade route died with it. After the Hundred Year War, few people returned to it, and it was soon surpassed as a trading hub by the nearby Republic City, which was better positioned for ocean trade. This is just one example of the many ways a mountain city might change over time. Think about whether the religion a place grew around is growing or declining, whether there are better trade routes, and whether the resource is running out or less necessary than before. All of these will shape the feel of your mountain city to be a living place that is either dying, thriving, or adapting to changing circumstances.

Questioning assumptions

Let's take a step back. Us humans get most of our food from flat land. We cannot survive easily in colder temperatures. Traversing mountains is difficult for us. Mountains seem like a staple of our environment, shaping how and where we live. This is not necessarily true in fiction. In fact, it's not even necessarily true in parts of our world. Places like Senegal, Estonia, Denmark, or the Gambia rarely reach higher than a few dozen metres of elevation, so a lot of what we've talked about isn't applicable for them, or perhaps your world, whatever it looks like. Alternatively, mountains might not present the same obstacles or opportunities to people in your world. While mountains are often some of the first things we put down on a map when worldbuilding, doing so can accidentally codify a lot of things we may not think about. Let's consider some fictional worlds that don't have the same relationship with mountains we do.

Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* involves a species of hive-mind aliens called the Formics. Their shared consciousness, telepathy, and biology means the communication and cooperation barriers mountains create are entirely inapplicable. They don't work the same way as we do. Their social hierarchy with queens at the top mean community, cultural exchange, and class take on a different meaning. In the sequel, *Speaker for the Dead*, a species called pequeninos live in insular, isolated communities on a planet with few mountains. Their whole life cycle is deeply dependent on forests. All of this drastically changes what's been discussed.

NK Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy features a tectonically violent world. Mountainous regions are common but dangerous because of how volatile they are. Even with the promise of resources, hot springs, or volcanically fertile earth, it's usually considered too dangerous to spend much time there. As a result, cities rarely, if ever, evolve in the mountains. In fact, distance from fault lines is *more* important than access to the sea.

Adrian Tchaikovsky's *Children of Time* is one of the best science-fiction books out there now, and it features a world ruled not by humans, but spiders. We might build our cities on flat plains, but spiders need verticality and naturally evolved in forest environments. Their cities grow in forests or mountains with space to weave, dive, and climb. We rely on grazing livestock and crops, but spiders eat insects which thrive in sheltered, ecologically diverse areas. We find travelling vertically difficult, making mountains major obstacles, while spiders find vertical travel easy. This might make cultural exchange and trade easier in their world, with mountains less likely to become national borders. Perhaps in your world mountains aren't the largest, most defensible positions. Huge trees might be.

Many of the most valuable materials in our world, such as gold, silver, and salt, are found in mountains, as they heave up layers of the Earth to more accessible depths, but in Frank Herbert's *Dune,* the most valuable material in the universe, the Spice, is found in deserts. The Spice is a byproduct of the lifecycle of massive creatures called sandworms. Settlements need to be set up near their deposits, but in safe regions with access to massive underground aquifers. These dynamics radically shift how and why cities form. Natural resources might not be found near mountains in your world.

Consider how your world might change how people interact with mountains. The same can be said of rivers or forests or oceans or swamps. Little changes like these can have huge consequences and give a distinct flavour to your world.

Mountain civilisations

A mountainous environment will heavily impact any civilisation growing there. The first worldbuilding question is potentially: how does a central

authority maintain control over such a region? In *The Elder Scrolls* series, High Rock is a mountainous province in the northwest of the Empire. It resisted integration for a long time, and even once incorporated, it remained one of the most culturally independent. The Empire dealt with this province by allowing for more local autonomy and demanding more symbolic gestures of authority. Projecting force into the mountains would have been expensive. On the one hand, local autonomy can lower the chance of rebellion, as people are less concerned with a distant power telling them what to do. The Mongol Empire, the Romans, and others employed similar strategies. On the other hand, autonomy fosters independence movements and risks secession, especially if a polity feels like they are subservient to a foreign power but get nothing from it.

Ethiopia's claim to fame is being the only sub-Saharan African country to never be colonised, despite many attempts, largely owed to its defensible mountainous landscape. Perhaps a mountainous region is an unstable sore eye for your nation, repeatedly rebelling, or perhaps its loyalty has been slowly assured after generations of 'assimilation' tactics. Maybe it shares a cultural narrative with a nearby power and *wants* to be integrated. Whatever the case, one way to look at a civilisation is through their relationship with those in power and how their geography changes that relationship with different places.

There's an old Afghani saying: 'A mountain never meets a mountain, but a man meets a man.' Afghanistan is famously mountainous and sayings like this draw on the familiar difficulties of climbing mountains to say people can compromise even in difficult situations. Environments affect culture, language, diet, and even political institutions. They form part of the architecture of how we view the world, what we value, what we treasure, what we fear, and how we define ourselves. While Afghanistan drew on mountains, a river-based civilisation might say, 'Water never flows uphill, but a man can climb one.' Think about the metaphors and analogies people might use. This is also a really good way to differentiate how characters speak, indicating their origins and thought process by the language they use.

Food is a radically underrated element of worldbuilding. It differs from country to country, region to region, and even town to town. People in my home city argue over who makes the better pies: Sheffield or Fairlie. Nowadays, a diversity of food and ingredients is available in most developed countries, but that wasn't always the case. The surrounding

environment impacts how food is cooked, what's popular, which prayers are said over it, and which ingredients are used. Mountains are necessarily going to change what kinds of crops, spices, and animals are available. Trade and cultural exchange will alter that, but we can still see a lot of the original regional diet's influence.

What specialised farming practices have your mountain civilizations adopted? What kind of crops grow in their altitude or weather? What flora or fauna thrive there they might depend on? Incans developed tiered farming to combat their mountain environment. Mongolia's naturally high altitude makes it relatively cold and difficult to grow crops, leading to a fat- and dairy-dense diet taken from grazing animals which *can* thrive there.

Usually, mountains will create a wetter and a drier side. Rain comes in from one direction, but the mountains block its passage over. The result is fertile or jungle basins on one side and arid regions on the other. Here in New Zealand, when you drive through the Southern Alps, you can see the moment you transition from lush rainforest on the West Coast to the brown tussock of Canterbury. The east coast has adapted to livestock farming as a result.

The 'sun deity' is a common trope in mountain civilisations: the Incan religion was otherwise known as the Cult of the Sun, the Ethiopian Gyuku people believe their god Gnai rests on Mount Kenya and embodies all things required for life, including the sun, and one of the few surviving details of the Bulgar religion out of the Ural Mountains is that Tengri was associated with light and the sun. The indomitability of mountains in some places has lent many of them an 'untouchable' or divine aura, with mountains becoming the home of the gods—especially considering they connect with the clouds and sky from which rain and lightning fall. Examples of mountains that carry a divine gravitas include Mount Olympus, Mount Sinai, Mount Kailash, and Mount Meru. After visiting Mount Fuji myself, I can see how the mountain came to carry such spiritual significance in Japan. Its nigh-perfect symmetry and all-encompassing view of that region of Japan makes it feel like a god, especially as the sun rises behind it like a halo. It feels *intentional.* Combine all these things with the importance of the seasons, the Sun returning in the spring, and the turn of the equinox, and it is no wonder mountains play such a key spiritual role for so many. Living in the mountains is dangerous, cold, and volatile, so the Sun plays an even more crucial role for them. With fewer safety nets in

their agriculture, a failed harvest is even more dire than those on the flatlands.

But again, let's question the assumptions we're making here. A sun god becomes important *because* of how much we depend on sunlight and rainwater, all of which come from the sky. Mountains being such cold and inhospitable places makes warmth all the more important. But let's return to Arrakis in Frank Herbert's *Dune.* The native Fremen imagine the sandworms as the embodiment of God because of how essential they are to the ecosystem of the planet and their role in creating the Spice—a fundamental part of the Fremen diet, culture, and way of thinking. Arrakis is a desolate, harsh mistress of a world where the Sun will kill you if given the chance. There is little, if any rain, and the water instead is found in underground aquifers. They don't connect the sky to the divine, instead regarding the earth beneath them as the giver of life. Mountains present small oases of protection from the sands, but they are not particularly identified with any special religious significance.

With this in mind, think about the physical space your civilisations associate with life, love, death, or justice. Flatlands are the most hospitable place on Earth for growing food and families, but what if food grows more easily on mountains in your world? *The Stormlight Archives* sees the continent ravaged with vicious 'high storms' capable of ripping up trees and wiping townships on the flatlands off the map. In response, a lot of cities like Kharbranth are built in chasms or against cliffs or in the wedge of mountains for protection. All of these things change our relationship with our environment.

Environmental determinism is bad worldbuilding

In Frank Herbert's *Dune,* the desert dwelling Fremen are constantly on the verge of running out of water. This forced them to develop suits which recycle their sweat, urine, and other bodily fluids to get as much as possible out of every drop. When somebody dies, their water is drained into a 'deathstill' to keep their water for the tribe. Spitting before someone is seen as a sign of respect; you're giving up water for them. True enough, the

environment will create pressures and questions for your civilisation. Ideas, beliefs, and practises do not evolve in a vacuum, and geography is one factor in that. If they live on a desert planet, the afterlife might be a place full of endless water.

The first go-to for any worldbuilder is often looking at the environment of a planet, region, or city and drawing cultural elements out of that, but this can lead to some one-dimensional worldbuilding. It's very easy to think, 'hey, they live in the mountains, so they must like climbing and herding goats and drinking mountain dew and worship a god of peaks and valleys,' but civilisation is always more complicated than our environment. It can be a contributing factor, but things like social structures, religious ideas, agricultural practices, and hierarchies cannot be reduced to merely that. They carry over from past social conditions, political relationships, or pressures that may have nothing to do with their environment. They can come from the wars we fight, the important moments in our history, the aspirations of our civilisation, our relationships with other civilisations, and the individual personalities of the people there. Humanity has long since eliminated many of the environmental pressures that would normally shape us—yet our culture keeps evolving.

Too often, worldbuilding is a snapshot of the modern world. We look at our map and design a world based on the forces at play at the time of our story, ignoring the historical context our world must have been built atop of. We too readily have an explanation for every little detail, when in reality so much of culture has wildly diverged from however it began.

Colonialism, technological advancement, migration, and a myriad of other things all mean the threats and pressures of the past may not apply anymore, or at least not in the same way. This doesn't mean the symbols, practises, philosophies, or religions growing from them will disappear. Instead, they evolve. We keep pieces from the past and discard others all the time. That active and passive choice of what we keep versus what we leave behind is just as significant as whatever it meant in the first place.

Consider how people *used* to die historically, how they *used* to deal with death, and how those things have changed. From that, you can create a fascinating tapestry of old and new influences, contradictions, and long dead traditions people no longer fully understand. Not *everything* in the way people live should be perfectly explicable by the way things are at the time of the story.

Cultural elements can become completely unrecognisable and take on wholly new purposes. The Cooper's Hill Cheese-Rolling and Wake is an annual event in Gloucester, England, where participants chase a wheel of cheese down a hill. Its origins are unclear, but it may have been something to do with who got grazing rights on a common area, or perhaps a pagan ritual from pre-Christian England that once involved scattering buns and fruits from the hill to symbolise fertility and a good harvest. Whatever its origins, it looks nothing like what it once did. When worldbuilding, these sorts of disconnected and wild features of a society make a place feel like it has a living history.

Cross-cultural exchange also introduces things from all around the world which may have no connection to the environment whatsoever—ways of cooking, certain foods, traditional dances, rituals and beliefs. This is especially the case in an era of increasing globalisation. The effects and limits of our local environment are less important than ever. Science fiction has long lent into the 'melting pot' image of the future, where the lines between our cultures merge and blend as the world globalises.

It's possibly more effective to look at a society in terms of its *influences* than what you would immediately draw out of its environment. The threats, obstacles, and priorities people were once concerned with may no longer apply. A 'mountain civilisation' doesn't need to worship mountain goats just because thousands of years ago, they were an important food source. Humanity is constantly evolving, and great worldbuilding captures that evolution.

Mountains needn't be the most inhospitable environment to settle in. Most of Colombia's population lives at higher altitudes instead of on the coastal flatlands because the dense jungle and mosquitoes made it harder to live there. In this sense, mountain life was *easier*. It was more temperate and safer. These assumptions we make about geography aren't always true and certainly need to be questioned for your fictional world.

Mountains *can* form the borders of a country, but there are lots of reasons they wouldn't. Romania is divided in two by the Carpathians, but a long history of cultural and political unity, a shared language, similar traditions, and the climate of European unification and nationalism in the late nineteenth century saw Romania overcome any geographical barriers posed. Colonisation often creates distinct (and unnatural) divisions within an area such that when independence comes, these divisions have a bigger

impact on where borders are than mountains might. Don't assume mountains always create barriers, or that they're the only reason for a political distinction.

Summary

1. Mountains often form borders and give rise to distinct cultural identities by limiting force projection, trade, and cultural exchange.
2. Mountains can give rise to resource cities which boom and bust with the use of that resource. They tend to be poorer as profits are exported, and this can shape the economic and political identity of the region.
3. Trade cities are often diverse and richer, but they live and die on the importance of the trade route they sit on. Consider what trade flows through it, from where it comes, and to whom it goes. How would those cultures affect the city? Technology, policy, and magic can change what 'trade city' means.
4. Religious or cultural significance often influence where and how mountain cities might appear. People are naturally drawn to centres of power.
5. Question the assumptions made around mountains and civilisation in our world. Does your world face the same struggles, needs, and come up with the same solutions? People in your world may have a very different relationship with mountains.
6. Mountainous regions are notoriously difficult for an outside power to control. Some give them more autonomy, others repress it, while some introduce assimilation tactics.
7. Food is an underrated element of worldbuilding, and mountains will heavily impact the sort of food available, how it's made, and why it's made.
8. Environmental determinism can lead to one-dimensional worldbuilding. Culture develops in a thousand ways, most of which are cross-cultural and have nothing to do with their environment. Don't reduce your civilisations to whatever happens to be around them.

ISLAND CIVILISATIONS

A Song of Ice and Fire by George RR Martin
The Wheel of Time by Robert Jordan
Laputa: Castle in the Sky
Diaspora by Greg Egan
The Earthsea Cycle by Ursula K Le Guin
Snow Crash by Neal Stephenson
The History of Middle Earth IX by JRR Tolkien and Christopher Tolkien
Avatar: The Last Airbender
The Elder Scrolls

Something draws us to the mythic, far-off island. Often fallen, often technologically advanced, often promising great new powers, these are places of wonder, mystery, and adventure. Prominent examples include Atlantis, Tír na nÓg, Skull Island, Themyscira, Numenor, Laputa, and even New Zealand in the eyes of some, which we all know doesn't really exist. Island civilisations have been the object of fascination for thousands of years, inspiring the idea that out there, just over the horizon, is a truly awesome place—if only we can find it. Islands themselves have shaped human history, changed how we live, and they offer a fascinating place to begin worldbuilding.

In this chapter, we'll go over how islands intersect with culture, myth, politics, the environment, language, diseases, and disasters, how islands work as superpowers, and why Aotearoa has so many goddamn flightless birds.

Culture

In George RR Martin's Westeros, the Greyjoy family rules a harsh archipelago called the Iron Islands. The islands endure vicious storms, the

surrounding ocean is deadly, and the weather and stony crags make growing food and raising livestock immensely difficult. The islands are also resource poor. Life there is nasty, brutish, and short. All of this means building intergenerational wealth is hard and a bad harvest is more dangerous than other places in Westeros. These conditions gave rise to a raiding culture not unlike that of the Vikings, where they took up raiding and pillaging the coast of Westeros seasonally—for slaves, women, and plunder.

Harsh environmental pressures like these can shape the way we view the world, the values we adopt, our concepts of justice and equity, deserving, and the questions we seek to answer. The Iron Islands' religion is centered around the Drowned God, and many of its tenets are targeted at answering, 'Why is the world so harsh and cruel?' The answer being, 'It's a dog eats dog world.' Being strong means you take what you wish—just as much because they *need* to as because of this cultural value in the abstract. It justifies their raiding practices. The Drowned God is forcing people to be 'strong' by making them take what they need to survive. Hence the Greyjoy house motto, 'We Do Not Sow'—instead, they reap. They look down on farming and continental ways of living as servile and weak, but this value framework came *after* they found these things difficult, not before. If another way of living came along, there's every reason to believe this value system would change too. While we imagine the Vikings as violent raiders, the reality is a lot of them were farmers who wanted arable land of their own.

Vikings differ from the residents of the Iron Islands in this important distinction. After the Siege of Chartres in 911, the Frankish King granted a faction of Vikings lands in exchange for allegiance, religious conversion, and defense against further raids. One of those Vikings was Rollo, who went on the found the House of Normandy. This faction took up permanent residence in France, assimilated, and began farming. Likewise, following the Great Heathen Army in 865, the Vikings established the Danelaw in the British Isles, with many settling and taking lands to farm. Vikings were very interested in settling down on fertile lands with kinder seasons of their own. The fact this was not carried over to the culture of the Iron Islands does reveal some of the more cartoonish worldbuilding in George RR Martin's work, but what matters more is the visceral impression the Iron Islands leaves on us as a real place. Worldbuilding is about immersion, ultimately, and reflecting the real world is only one way to do that.

Not all islands are inhospitable hellscapes like the Iron Islands or Australia, where the Earth itself wants you dead. Hawaii is a fertile, green, and life-giving chain of islands in the Pacific, and you can see how this might beg different philosophical questions. Traditional religions in Hawaii place a lot more emphasis on caring for the environment and co-existing with it, with especial emphasis placed on the ocean—a dependable source of food and place of leisure, in sharp contrast to the ocean around the Iron Islands. Life has its struggles, but it is not nasty, brutish, and short. 'Mālama i ke kai a e mālama ke kai iāʻoe' translates to, 'Care for the ocean and the ocean will care for you.' Polynesian societies share a cultural lineage, but more importantly, they share cultural questions—problems and answers that reflect, at least in part, their environment. Their island ecosystems were complex and fruitful, but fragile and required care.

Island civilisations all have their own unique relationship with the ocean (or perhaps even a lake depending on your world) which gives rise to different questions—ethical, existential, and scientific—and shapes society and its values. How we imagine the island is partly defined by the nature of the ocean that surrounds it, and vice versa. How does this manifest in daily behaviours, seasonal ceremonies, or as rites of passage while they grow up?

A second way culture manifests is in language and metaphor—how we speak about and analyse the world—often drawing on familiar cultural touchstones for comparison and creating shared points of understanding that allow for easy communication. Māori sayings are full of metaphors and similes that use island and ocean imagery. 'Kei uta nga hau o Riripa te tu ai' likens a lazy person to someone who waits on the shore to eat fish, while 'Ehara koe i te ringa huti punga!' likens someone who contributes the most to the one who pulls up an anchor. Robert Jordan drew on similar ideas in worldbuilding the Sea People in *The Wheel of Time* series, where the ocean becomes a metaphor for power and divinity in their stories. Ruling the ocean is equivocated with ruling the world and possessing the greatest power a civilisation ever could. Consider the cultural touchstones of your civilisation and where the ocean might fit into that. Look to idioms and sayings that employ what they hate, fear, or idolise. Think about the tools, skills, and resources they rely on most because of environmental pressures.

Food is, again, perhaps the most underrated element of worldbuilding. How we cook, what we cook, and what we trade for all distinguish one culture from another. Fish is probably the first thing to come to mind with

island civilisations, and that's fair given how important this resource is to places like Japan, the United Kingdom, and Polynesia, but a more interesting distinction is *isolation.*

Aotearoa New Zealand broke away from continental Gondwana over eighty-million years ago, and its immense distance from any other landmass made it difficult for birds or the seeds and pollen of foreign plants to come here unaided. As a result, Aotearoa has developed a complex and unique ecology with hundreds of flora and fauna found nowhere else in the world. Endemic New Zealand beech trees are covered in tubules which produce a delectable honeydew. For almost all its history, there were no significant predators like cats or rodents at all. Humans only arrived in the 1200s, only then bringing rats with them. Because of this, the islands here developed a huge population of flightless birds. With no predators, they had no need to fly. The native flora and fauna here provided a unique diet for Māori settlers, found nowhere else in the world. Think about what isolation might have given rise to ecologically, what kind of fruits, seeds, or animals might have made their way from nearby landmasses, and how this changes the diet of those living there.

A common mistake

This way of thinking looks back primarily on the distant past and misses something important. An increasingly globalised world radically changes what an island produces and consumes. Despite being an island, many of Cuba's dishes do not involve seafood. Arroz con pollo ('rice with chicken') uses onions and saffron, drawing from a mix of Spanish and West African cuisine. This has little to do with its environment and all to do with Spanish colonisation and the import of African slaves. A lot of islands were transformed into plantations, changing the environment and diet in doing so. This is not an inherent part of an island's culture, but who came to it, why, and what they brought with them will radically shape it. Islands are unique in how cultural exchange is more difficult than over land, so knowing where trade routes, political interests, or easier sailing passages would take people will help you understand where these influences might come from.

The same can be said for value and belief systems or language and metaphors. Over time, cultural influences make their way into every society, be it through colonisation, trade, or simple cultural exchange. These bring with them new foods, languages, sayings, values, and beliefs, the origins of which may be completely lost by the time they become commonplace. In contrast, Japan enforced its own self-isolation throughout the Tokugawa period, until the United States came knocking with a ship full of cannons and freedom. How does your island *relate* to its sense of isolation? It could reinforce the feeling of a distinct cultural identity, inspire stories about what might be 'out there', or incentivise exploration and complex seafaring technology.

In our chapter on mountains, we discussed how environmental determinism is bad worldbuilding. People will sometimes look at where a society lives and ask how that would affect it *now*, forgetting that there is a myriad of influences over hundreds or even thousands of years shaping how it thinks and acts. Instead of looking at the cultural influences on an island at the time of your story, it may be useful to understand an island (or any society when worldbuilding) as a series of cultural influences *over time*. Some of those influences may not even be relevant anymore. Take any island civilisation into the future, and an island's environment will play less and less of a role in deciding what people eat, believe, and think. Instead, it'll be decided by a sense of regional or global community. Where is your society on that scale? Making it so everything is compared to sailing a ship, or making every person is a fisherman, makes a society feel one-dimensional, like you've taken every element of them from one factor when that's just not the case in reality.

Islands can also be large and allow for a huge diversity in cultural development, sometimes having nothing whatsoever to do with the ocean. Volcanoes, mountains, crater-lakes, geothermal springs, and typhoons and hurricanes are all common features of island living around the world, each of which can play a huge role in the way societies develop. As a thought experiment, take away the ocean and figure out some cultural, economic, linguistic, or other elements that might evolve. The 'planet of hats' is a trope where *all* people in a society, or even a whole world, are defined by an archetype—often reflected in their environment, sometimes embodied by the 'one-biome planet' trope. For example, you might make all island people into adventurous pirate types who search the world for gold and *only*

say things like ‘Seas bless you!’ or ‘Waves take you!’ This is one-dimensional and often comes across as pretty corny. It pretends there aren’t a myriad of other influences on a culture. Even places like Tuvalu, a tiny, tropical nation of reefs and atolls, express a diverse array of cultural influences.

Islands often survive as important trade junctions in a network in a global economy, bringing income and resources which might otherwise not make it to the island. This can slowly erode the local culture or undermine the native population’s influence in the region as others move in. These also turn them into strategically important points. The United States wanted Hawaii as a gateway to eastern markets and to give it a military foothold in the far Pacific. Imagine how your islands might be threatened by the movement of people or used as a pawn in a greater political game.

Societies are not mirrors to their surroundings; societies are malls and graveyards for all the people that make them.

The mythic island

Islands have always occupied a strange place in the cultural zeitgeist. People have imagined them as divine, idealised, and magical. Think of Atlantis, Hawaiki, or Tír na nÓg. Almost all of the Greek gods were born on a different island, and the dead are often separated from the living by a wide ocean. Philip Pullman draws on this imagery in creating his land of the dead in *The Amber Spyglass*.

> ‘[When you die] you go with [Death] in a boat out across the lake into the mist. What happens there, nobody knows. No-one’s ever come back.’

Likewise, Hayao Miyazaki’s *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* plays on our tendency to mythologise islands as these distant, magical places we cannot reach and which contain some great power. Laputa is a floating city few have ever seen, holding the power of what can only be likened to a nuclear bomb. The belief this city will bring power and riches to those who control it guides the central conflict of the story.

These islands are less about worldbuilding a real island civilisation and more about what the island would mean to those who imagine it or mythologise it. Laputa and its robotic superweapons represent authority and opportunity, creating a fascinating conflict when the robots who populate it turn out to be kind-hearted. Its immense destructive power is juxtaposed with its incredible beauty. The island itself is the object of pursuit, a thing to fight over, and a goal that people have picked up over and over throughout history. Empires and power-hungry nations have sought it out repeatedly but never found it. It represents an old, fallen world that came before, with people harking back to that greater age. In this way, it becomes a connection to the past and a way to legitimise one's expansion and domination of others.

Islands appear repeatedly in mythology as places that cannot be reached, or if they can, a place from which one can never return. It allows the island to occupy a semi-real space as somewhere everyone believes is real, but they can never prove it exists. In that way, it becomes a very useful thing for religion. Atlantis is something more of a philosophical experiment, a commentary on Greek society by Plato, than a real place people were ever meant to find. With this in mind, ask what kind of world your society would idealise or be horrified by, and how could an island help embody that in religion or philosophy?

The mythic island takes on a slightly different role in a globalised, modern world. Few would ever believe it is *real* anymore, leaving it largely to the realm of old myth, though a small group of people will always be in search of it—not unlike Atlantis. Instead, plausible locations might claim to be the island of myth as a tourist narrative, or its symbolism might recede into the realm of social commentary.

Politics

It might surprise you to learn over half of all island civilisations today are archipelagos, and this radically affects their political setup. Dag Anckar's paper *Archipelagos and Political Engineering* found a number of important things. While islands are prone to unitary democratic governments because of their smaller populations, archipelagos naturally foster decentralised power structures like a federal system, with each island

governing itself under a single unifying authority. They are also more prone to bicameralism. Multi-island nations often must grapple with a diversity of cultural identities and how to represent them all politically. Some create quotas for the different cultural groups in parliament, while others include representatives from each in the executive branch. Some theories suggest their smaller size, on average, makes democracy more likely, but it'd be too great a simplification to say island civilisations *are* more democratic. Being shielded from outside conflicts and having less incentive to take up an aggressive foreign policy are equally important, but this may not be the case in your world. Exceptions abound: Japan and Britain were some of the most aggressively expansionist powers of the last few centuries.

Henry Srebnik's paper *Small Island Nations and Democratic Values* explores how island nations tend to be more accountable, democratic, and free in the modern age—even if they have a monarchy or ruling class. The smaller populations mean people have more direct access to government and the difficulty of maintaining control across an archipelago encourages accountability. This doesn't mean your island civilisation *has* to be liberally oriented, but it is a political force to account for in designing your world. Maybe the monarch is more beholden to their advisors, or the nobles are granted more local autonomy.

Oceans make it difficult to project force and harder to engage in cultural exchange, meaning communities tend to develop around those borders. This segregation can give rise to a lot of cultural diversity in language, cultural practices, and religion. The Philippines is one of the most diverse countries in the world, with over seven thousand islands and almost two hundred ethnolinguistic groups. Some of these are the result of invasion, colonisation, or natural cultural exchange from other regions, but most are the natural result of its diverse archipelago.

A truly fascinating example of cultural diversification in something of an archipelago is Greg Egan's *Diaspora.* In this book, humans are digital beings living on giant hard drives, but each drive is isolated from the others, almost like an island. Each drive develops a vastly different culture in the digital sphere. One city decides they all want to experience time ten times faster than everyone else, and so they code themselves to live exactly that. Another chooses to have physical robotic forms they control to emulate old humanity. Yet another lives in the second dimension. Don't just think in

terms of cultures today but be creative with what you've got in your world that we might not have and find what diversity that might give rise to.

For most of its history, the Philippines was a series of culturally connected but politically independent or loosely autonomous islands, with each of these cultural groups wanting their own representation and chiefdoms. While numerous attempts were made to unite various sections of the archipelago, it was a back-and-forth history of groups uniting and breaking apart—facilitated by the ocean providing a geographical barrier. We see a similar history reflected in the worldbuilding of Ursula K Le Guin's *Earthsea* novels. The archipelago has a rich history of kings, queens, and warlords trying to establish long-lasting, multi-island empires and dynasties but rarely succeeding for long, with islands breaking off or drifting away politically. They were unable to maintain lines of communication, resources, or military influence to enforce their authority. While there is magic in the *Earthsea* series, it is restricted to a few practitioners and not nearly powerful enough to bridge the political gap between islands.

It wasn't until the Spanish came along in 1565 that the Philippines were unified for the first time, but to be clear, this was *despite* the geographical barriers and cultural diversity. The technological and organisational advantage the colonists had allowed them to overcome any such barrier. Today, with radio, flight, and other modern technology, the ocean is less a barrier than ever for communication, force-projection, or resource management, allowing archipelagos to develop a central political system and shared cultural narrative more easily. The tactics we see in many archipelagos today are simply trying to bridge that gap themselves by allowing more local autonomy or central representation.

Consider whether you want your island civilization to inhabit an archipelago and how that would affect its political and cultural makeup. If it has been unified, how did they overcome the force-projection issue? Superior technology, organisational prowess, and overwhelming numbers have worked historically, but your world might have magic or technology allowing people to communicate much faster, transport troops or people, or otherwise negate the geography issue. Alternatively, the people themselves might be capable of things humans are not. The ability to fly would drastically change the barrier the ocean creates. Thereon from that, what political makeup do they have to ensure stability within an incredibly

diverse cultural range? Monocultural countries tend to be more stable, cohesive, and centralised. Also, remember to consider changes over time: how long ago was the archipelago unified? The farther back this happened, the more homogonous their culture will be, even if there are some small relics of differences from a bygone era. Finally, if the island has been a victim of colonisation, think about what the colonists left behind. Just recently, Mali removed French as their official language.

Archipelagos—be they floating islands in the sky, a muddled set of space stations, or a chain of volcanoes—are incredibly difficult to police, and that can make them havens for criminal enterprise. The Caribbean and the Philippines were hotbeds during the Golden Age of Piracy for a reason. Even today, one of the pirate capitals of the world is Indonesia. You can't easily blockade or control movement around a series of islands.

Of course, some islands are like the British Isles, New Zealand, or Japan, where although there are a number of islands, they are closely situated and the vast majority live on one or two landmasses. The larger the island, the less a lot of these things will apply. At some point, it ceases to be an island and becomes a continent of its own. Other inland pressures become more and more prominent, especially the less dependent a culture becomes on their relationship with the ocean.

Islands as superpowers

Despite the United Kingdom ruling over the largest empire in history, it's actually rare for islands to emerge as superpowers—especially on a global scale. It is instead far more common for islands to emerge as regional economic powers like Singapore or Venice, even as a city-state, utilising their defensible position and influence on ocean-trade to control a market.

Island nations' lower populations, often resource-poor lands, and inability to expand easily make empire-building a bit of a task and make them more vulnerable to outside influence—especially in a modern, globalised economy. Neal Stephenson has an interesting bit of commentary on this in *Snow Crash,* a book set in a cyberpunk dystopia, wherein he describes how corporations have grown so powerful that they're able to manipulate small governments, especially islands, into giving them favourable regulations. This is possible because corporations operate

globally while countries do not. Amazon has an annual income larger than Portugal and New Zealand combined. Smaller or less-developed countries can be vulnerable to corporate manipulation. They may lack the infrastructure to exploit their natural resources or be beholden to the number of people a company employs. Shell Oil controls over twenty percent of Nigeria's petroleum resources and uses that to flaunt state regulations over oil spills, causing huge environmental damage and bribing officials to protect themselves. Historically, the United Fruit Company (now Chiquita) out of the US dominated the banana trade in the Caribbean and Mesoamerica, to the point of once even sponsoring a military coup in Honduras to protect its trade interests.

Island nations can sometimes be more reliant on imports because they naturally lack certain resources, have smaller domestic markets, and because they specialise economically for a comparative advantage. Taiwan's specialisation in semiconductors is perhaps the greatest modern example of this. By making themselves economically essential to other powers like the US, they have protected themselves from Chinese encroachment—so far. On the other hand, a lack of resources can drive them to colonise or dominate nearby powers, as in the case of Imperial Japan.

So, how does an island nation become a world superpower? The two notable ones—Britain and Japan—share the same answer: technological disparity and ocean trade. It is no coincidence the British Empire expanded massively during the Industrial Revolution. Better weapons, faster ships, and a far greater resource production allowed them to outperform and outproduce much larger and less organised forces around the world. It all came down to a single resource: coal—and Britain had lots of it. Japan did not, but went about conquering Korea, Taiwan, and Manchuria to acquire these reserves. What they did have, however, was an organised military infrastructure and a powerful navy—including aircraft carriers and battleships—that their opponents could not hope to match, much like Britain. They would each occupy ports and extort brutal trade deals, using uprisings as an excuse to further invade and 'defend their civilians'. JRR Tolkien drew on this technological disparity in capturing Numenorean dominance across Middle Earth, as described in *History of Middle Earth IX, The Drowning of Anadune*:

> They were busy [creating] ships that should rise above the waters of the world and hold to the imagined seas. But they achieved only ships that would sail in the air of breath. And these ships, flying, came also to the lands of the new world, and to the East of the old world; and they reported that the world was round. Therefore many abandoned the gods and put them out of their legends. But men of Middle-Earth looked up with fear and wonder seeing the Numenoreans that descended out of the sky.

Flying ships allowed them to manoeuvre quickly and ambush enemies without warning. For them, magic was the technological disparity. However, it led them down a dark path of colonisation, repressing the people of Harad and Middle Earth, extracting resources, and eventually trying to invade heaven itself.

Both Japan and Britain rose in an era of booming ocean trade—all on an ocean they controlled. After long-distance trade networks like the Silk Road collapsed, money moved to the ocean, and Britain was perfectly situated to pick up the mantle.

If you want to create an island superpower, consider what technological, organisational, or magical advantage might allow them to exert force over such distance, which trade routes they would need to control, which materials they would seek to exploit, and what they do with this influence. Island empires often expand for different reasons to land-based empires, notably with a much higher emphasis on resource exploitation. In *Avatar: The Last Airbender,* the Fire Nation takes the most farmable region of the Earth Kingdom because they come from a mountainous island chain that makes agriculture difficult. In their case, fire magic allowed them to enter an Industrial Revolution before the other powers of the world, being more able to manipulate metal and heat than others. This was turned into both a military and economic advantage.

The other exception to this is a thalassocracy: a seaborne empire. It should come as no surprise that island powers exert force with navies. ‘Britannia Rules the Waves!’ was a rallying cry for a reason. At one point, a tiny island in the north governed a quarter of the Earth’s land surface and nigh on five-hundred million people, which was nearly a quarter of the world’s population at the time. Thalassocracies will often control trading

routes or key passages through the ocean, but more importantly, they do not tend to dominate the interior of a country. With their power resting in their navy, they often lack the ability to project force far from the coasts. Instead, they control port cities, extracting taxes and resources. It's worth noting that forty percent of the world lives within one hundred kilometres of a coast.

Island civilisations are particularly prone to thalassocracies, given how dependent many are on the ocean. The Tuʻi Tonga Empire expanded across the Pacific between 1200 and 1500 CE by controlling the trade of whale ivory, obsidian, basalt tools, and more. Consider how such a political force might play into your world. The thalassocracy even fit easily into science fiction, controlling port cities or junctions of inter-planetary travel, such as space stations or trading outposts on moons or small planets. However, even thalassocracies have been rare amongst island civilisations, and mostly emerged in the pre-modern period due to innovations in seafaring technologies.

Disease and disasters

There are no universal rules for how island environments turn out, certainly not when accounting for fictional worlds where anything happens because *you* want it to. Even so, an island's geographic isolation means diseases which ravage the mainland can't as easily spread to them. The Faroe Islands and Cyprus supposedly experienced fewer casualties during the Black Plague. The Knahaten Flu in *The Elder Scrolls* series spreads rapidly across Tamriel but seemingly halts at the Inner Sea, unable to reach the island Vvardenfell. As a result, the great houses on the mainland were left politically and economically weak, leaving way for the island houses to take control of the province. I bring this up primarily because disease is one of the great, but largely forgotten, influences on history. Anything that can kill swathes of people, force migration, and change religions is an integral part of worldbuilding. Consider how plague and disease might leave an island civilisation stronger than their continental neighbours.

On the other hand, islands are more vulnerable to disease. Smaller populations find it more difficult to bounce back and migration is normally not an option to escape the scourge. For diseases originating from other

lands, a lack of past exposure can make them even more deadly. How many times did colonists arrive in a new land and bring death in their wake?

The same can also be said for disasters. Back in 2010, my home city was hit by a seven-point-one earthquake. It saw a huge exodus from the city and sunk our market with effects we are still feeling today. I can walk around the centre of town and still find ruins from all those years ago—whole plots of land that have been demolished and never developed again. Given islands tend to pop up along continental lines and the diverging boundary of undersea tectonic plates, they're especially prone to earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanoes, and other world-shifting events. These disasters will play a critical role in a culture's history, even if they can deal with them. In Aneyoshi, Japan, you can still find stone markers warning of how far the water rises during a tsunami, telling people not to build any lower. Historically, cultures have built their settlements to adapt to these challenges, such as building homes on stilts near coastlines prone to flooding or tidal influences. We still see this in modern times, in addition to other precautions, such as building codes being stricter to defend against earthquakes. The more drastic the challenge, the more innovative the solution might be. After it became clear rising sea levels would destroy Tuvalu in a matter of decades, the government proposed they become the 'first digital nation'.

Summary

1. The relationship an island civilisation has with the surrounding ocean will impact the questions at the heart of their culture, giving rise to different value systems. Consider how that relationship manifests in language, metaphor, and cuisine.
2. Civilisations cannot be reduced to their environments. A myriad of forces act on them and give rise to different beliefs and practices, especially in an increasingly globalised world. Think about culture as a history of who has had influence in the region.
3. Isolation is one of the more interesting elements of island worldbuilding. What distinct flora and fauna might have developed there and nowhere else, and how does this shape the culture and daily lives?

4. The island often occupies and mythic place in the cultural zeitgeist, which reflects something of those who imagine it.
5. Archipelagos facilitate a diversity of culture, decentralised politics, democratic values, and rebellion—including crime. Consider what helped an archipelago unify.
6. Island civilisations are rarely superpowers, especially global ones. The ones that tend to rely on a technological and organisational disparity, as well as dominance in ocean trade. Sometimes these manifests in a thalassocracy.

FALLEN CIVILISATIONS

The Ruin by unknown
Halo: Combat Evolved
At the Mountains of Madness by HP Lovecraft
Transall by Gary Paulsen
Shards of Earth by Adrian Tchaikovsky
Horizon Zero Dawn developed by Guerilla Games
Those Who Remain by Michael Hopf
Two Robots at the End of the World by Timothy Hickson
The Fifth Season by NK Jemisin
Laputa: Castle in the Sky
Piranesi by Susanna Clarke
Excession by Iain M Banks

Can you imagine what it must have been like to live in the centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire? One Anglo-Saxon elegy, *The Ruin*, describes the Roman Ruins of Aquae Sulis (Bath) as 'the work of the giants'. *The Ruin* laments what was lost and reflects on the distant past. It would be over three hundred years before stone could be worked like the Romans did there in Britain. Other historians describe the Fall of Rome as God paying out the wages of sin in strife, war, and disease, to the point of even the land itself dying away. The average peasant in the Medieval Period must have wandered through those ruins in Bath with wonder, seeing crumbling walls made to keep out forgotten enemies—monuments to a lost past.

It's the same feeling players get when they first encounter a halo ring in *Halo: Combat Evolved* or read about the ancient, twisted, non-Euclidean ruins in *At the Mountains of Madness* by HP Lovecraft. As children, we're often taught the Roman Empire fell when the Visigoths sacked Rome and that was it. One simple, dark day snuffed the empire out. In reality, Rome's fall was neither simple nor quick, but it makes for a good story, doesn't it? Perhaps that's why we keep coming back to these ancient 'precursor' civilisations over and over, who rose so high and a little too close to the sun before falling.

Fallen civilisations and mythology

Humanity brought themselves to an apocalyptic end with the remnants of civilisation rearranging themselves into primitive tribes who all have different relationships with the 'Ancestors' and the ruins they left behind, in which the tribes now live. This sounds like *Horizon Zero Dawn,* but I'm actually describing *Transall* by Gary Paulsen, a childhood favourite of mine and my first exposure to the trope. So much of our culture and identity arises from our collective relationship with the past and our cultural memory, punctuated by the Greats and the Terribles. These historical narratives frame the way we see the world, ourselves, and others. Fallen civilisations fit this like a glove. Different factions in your story will have various relationships with the ancient, bygone civilisation depending on the role its remnants play in daily life.

In *Transall,* tribes have 'storyteller' figures responsible for keeping the memory of humanity's ultimate destruction and warning people against the same mistakes. They take on a pseudo-religious role, speaking about the past in scriptural terms, passing down stories of what life might have been like as a set of parables and lessons. Many important moments from our history are preserved in religious texts and practises as a way of crystallising them in the cultural memory, but they have been recorded with the bias of the religion's agenda. The hearsay approach from Transall is also prone to warping the truth with new additions and omissions from generation to generation. It's in these methods you might explore how different factions tell the same story differently, which elements they preserve, mythologise, and remember. Is the fallen civilisation one of demons or giants? Is it a cautionary tale or a vision to return to? Depending on their present values and relationship with that civilisation historically, a faction will have a radically different mythological relationship with these artefacts and ruins.

These narratives around the 'Precursors' will often force them to fit the modern biases, goals, and philosophies of the present peoples. In *Shards of Earth* by Adrian Tchaikovsky, the Originators left behind ruins and artefacts all over the universe which somehow repel ancient, eldritch, planet-consuming beings called Architects. Aside from this, almost nothing is known about the Originators, and various players in the series exploit this

lack of knowledge for their own gain. One faction claims humans are the descendants of these Originators and thus the only rightful heirs to the universe, justifying seizing anything they've built. This is, of course, unprovable but also unfalsifiable. In reality, it's more about their hatred for aliens and desperation after losing planet Earth itself. The Hegemony, a cultic faction of shellfish aliens, *also* claims heritage with the Originators, though this is much less about conquest and xenophobia and more about reinforcing the bizarre mythology their whole culture operates and roleplays in, painting themselves as pseudo-demi-gods. We like feeling connected to the past because it lets us believe our way of life came from somewhere *real* or authentic, and it's so easy to look up to this technologically advanced fallen civilisation and assume they must have known better, right? Emulating them becomes a *moral* thing, both prescribing and validating a way of life.

This is something we've seen repeatedly in real life, as well. Throughout European history, every civilisation from the Carolingian Holy Roman Empire to the Ottomans has claimed to be the 'true successor' to Rome. Even the Nazis were obsessed with Rome and Ancient Greece. They tried to establish some sort of cultural and ethnic lineage between them as a way of justifying themselves as the natural leaders of Europe, which resulted in a host of nonsense archaeology. Herman Wirth, who founded the *Ahnenerbe* to 'research German ancestral heritage', even claimed Atlantis was originally inhabited by the Germanic peoples.

In this way, Rome takes on a pseudo-mythical position that is neither truly historically accurate nor totally without basis. Different groups attach their own cultural memory to it. They hold up this past as something divinely blessed and a mark of authenticity, using it to legitimise their claim to lands or power, to imagine a social-ethnic group as something inherent, or to invest their value system with some sort of primal inerrancy.

We like to think of history as a concrete set of facts and dates when it's much closer to a story we tell ourselves about the world, and we can't escape our own biases when we tell it. Our understanding of the past affects our view of the present, and our understanding of the present affects how we read the past. That 'story' becomes especially prevalent when we don't know much about this 'Precursor' civilisation. While we now have the tools to understand much of Roman life, that was not always the case. This creates an epistemological gap that allows people to exploit, reinterpret, and

ignore past civilisations. Ruins, artefacts, and peoples can be made to represent whatever someone wants, such as condemning a particular way of life, defining what it means to be a citizen, or justifying genocide.

However, we still do this even when we *do* know a lot about these fallen civilisations. G Michael Hopf wrote of the cyclical rise and fall of civilizations in his 2016 post-apocalyptic novel *Those Who Remain*: 'Hard times create strong men. Strong men create good times. Good times create weak men. And, weak men create hard times.' This line has been adopted by the collective consciousness of the internet and popped up in political circles more than a few times. However, it's almost always used to claim we are currently living with 'weak men', or even worse, that 'Western civilisation' is failing. Of course, this line is nonsense and ahistorical—not to mention something from a work of fiction that should be interpreted with a poetic grain of salt.

Those who take this quote too literally or mistake it for a historical pearl of wisdom often refer to the post-World War II era of economic development in the United States as the 'good times' created by the 'strong men' who fought in the war, but this was equally a period of Jim Crow laws, segregation, and one where women could rarely escape abusive marriages. Beyond this, what 'weak men' created the 'hard times' of World War II? Was it the 'weak men' who fought in World War I, a war even more hellish than the second? Did the Great Depression create 'strong men', leading to the good times of… World War II? The phrase is often used to idealise and mythologise this era of history, lionise people from the past, denigrate those who live today, and justify assumptions about the modern world.

These sorts of people will often attribute the Fall of Rome to the decadence or 'moral weakness' of its men and claim parallels in modern society when, of course, the slow decline of the Western Roman Empire was immensely complicated. It cannot be reduced to a slogan. This whole idea falls apart at the slightest scrutiny and is purely used for political rhetoric. It's a narrative people map onto civilisational collapse so they can warn of parallels today for political purposes. This is not to say we cannot make comparisons to the past. History repeats itself. However, while people *love* fitting things into religious narratives, cultural legends, family legacies, or a catchy quote from a novel, it's dangerous to make prescriptions from them. They tend to oversimplify and omit important realities.

Be aware of the planet of hats trope. This is where every person in a civilisation feels or acts the exact same way about something, and this applies to your fallen civilisation too. While they might have a shared mythology around them, give your characters individual cultural and personal understandings within that. Maybe all your characters see these ruins as a warning about not going to space, but one character thinks this means the stars should be studied while another thinks it means they should study leaves and tree patterns. The bigger the knowledge gap, the more diversity of belief there may well be.

Personal discovery as worldbuilding

It's a story as old as the trope itself: a character walks through the ruins of an ancient, mysterious civilisation and asks themselves, *what happened here*? The mystery is slowly unveiled over the course of the story to explain who built these places and what happened to them, culminating in some great revelation to the protagonist. *Horizon Zero Dawn* and *Halo: Combat Evolved* tell surprisingly similar stories on the surface, but there is a reason *Horizon Zero Dawn* handles this old trope better. Despite sharing the same narrative questions, the revelation in *Halo: Combat Evolved* about what the Halo ring is, what it does, and the galactic threat of the alien Flood doesn't matter to Master Chief on a personal level beyond it being a threat. Aloy from *Horizon Zero Dawn*, on the other hand, is born into a culture which admires the 'Old Ones', and she has a deep connection to them personally after being born out of one of their facilities without knowing why. Learning about the Old Ones and Elizabeth Sobeck isn't just a fascinating mystery, but it is a journey that answers Aloy's personal questions, addresses her insecurities, and challenges her understanding of herself. It's a brilliant example of connecting worldbuilding to story.

There are a few ways to make exposition delivery more interesting, one of which is building a mystery around it by withholding information and getting the reader or player to *want* answers. Both aforementioned games do this fantastically. Another is to give it character consequences. If we understand what learning information means for a character on a personal level, we're more likely to care about and remember the information. It gives it dimensionality within the story. If there's a critical revelation about

your fallen civilisation you want to stick with your readers, consider how it could change their arc, affect their personal struggles, alter their view of themselves, or answer questions that plague them. Let it affect their relationships with others. Let it be something *personal* just as much as *interesting*. Perhaps your character's religion is centred on the worship of the Precursors, only for them to realise these people were not as great as they imagine. Perhaps they've been abused and told they're worthless their whole life, only to realise the Precursors created *them* to save the world. Perhaps the raw power of the Precursors corrupts them over time.

In the ruins of greatness

Your precursor civilisation may have left no mark on the world, but I think any fallen civilisation worth its greatness leaves behind a good number of ruins and relics. Lovecraft's and Asimov's stories are littered with the ruins of such.

They had built the concrete pillars that pierced the sky, painted every picture on those huge canvasses, and marked every street corner with mysterious red and yellow signs, and they had done it with hands far nimbler than Toaster's own, which were just two forks better at stacking boxes than bricklaying and art. Creatures of iron squatted in the wreckage of bridges and town halls, watching Toaster and Motherboard as they trekked by. Constellations of concrete and steel latched onto the morning light to make themselves more beautiful, to remind themselves of what they had once looked like.

This is from my own 'Two Robots at the End of the World'. It follows Toaster and Motherboard as they try to figure out exactly how humans lived from the ruins they left behind.

One thing to keep in mind is how differently the world to come after might develop. Ruins mean two worlds layered over top of each other. With all the technology and power this fallen civilisation might have been working with, it would have developed differently and by different rules, capable of different things reflected in where these ruins are, what they were for, and how they were designed. Castles are a product of the

politically fractured and much more hostile medieval period, where local lords were more likely to need defences. While the Roman Empire was expansionist, its interior was largely peaceful, meaning there wasn't as much need for such defensive fortifications. Not only this, but Roman armies preferred meeting enemies in the field where their superior infantry were at their best. As a result, the ruins of the Medieval period are very different to those of the Roman period, and a similar dynamic may play a role in your world. Where could your fallen civilisation build cities which are no longer possible? Where were the important trade routes which may be no longer viable? What marks old borders which are no longer defended? What pressures exist in this fallen world that weren't applicable before?

NK Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* is based in a world periodically ravaged by apocalyptic earthquake-like events which topple civilisation and reshape the world. The continent people inhabit is timidly called the 'Stillness'. As a result, the world is littered with ancient ruins and artefacts, not just from one but from many fallen civilisations. There are marks of cities too far from arable land at the time of the story or built along trade routes rendered dangerous after the world changed. There are structures along fault lines where powerful magicians are kept to hold off earthquakes near civilisation. The world has retreated to the safest places as far from fault lines as possible. Cities—at least human ones—require a large, stable economy to sustain them, and in the wake of collapse, people tend to disperse to more easily accessible and reliable resources.

This constant cycle of fragmentation and rebuilding also means there's a huge amount of moral and cultural diversity in Jemisin's world. Hierarchical structures and religious organisations are repeatedly torn down and replaced, giving rise to an increasingly diverse array of ways to view, understand, and address the world. The bigger the sociological and technological difference between your new world and the old, the bigger the difference in their layout will be, even if people continue to inhabit some ancient places. Europe is full of cities built over the top of Roman ruins, so much so we find ancient roads and markets *underground.* Fundamentally, figure out how resources and people might have moved differently, as well as their different philosophical framework, and reflect that in the geography of your ruins and relics.

Precursor sites and relics can also become places of political capital, tourism, and financial interest. Relics left behind might be sold on the black market or studied intensely. Old coins can become jewellery or replacement currency. If they left any deadly ancient technology lying around, as neglectful godlike precursor civilisations tend to, then these might become points of geopolitical intrigue and tension—often deeply relevant to the story. In Studio Ghibli's *Laputa: Castle in the Sky,* the flying fortress of Laputa is coveted by various military factions for its promise of incredible weapons. As it disappears and reappears mysteriously, it's also the subject of myth and rumour. The entire story is about who ends up controlling the city. Something I always found bizarre about *Stargate's* worldbuilding is how neither the Goa'uld, the Wraith, nor humans ever built huge fortifications around these portals which controlled movement throughout the galaxy. In *Shards of Earth,* the Hegemony use the Originator relics as leverage, offering protection from the Architects in exchange for submission. Consider how the relics and ruins might be used for political leverage, displays of religious power, objects of wealth, social status, military hardware, or strategic locations.

Doomed to repeat history

We hear a lot about the lessons of history, and what greater lesson can there be than the fall of a great civilisation? Whether it's from natural disaster, a superweapon gone wrong, or hubris, their fall often acts as a warning, especially if there's some parallel with the characters or commentary on our world. Environmental collapse is the recurring theme these days, while nuclear devastation appeared a lot during the Cold War. In all likelihood, we're probably heading back to the fears of artificial intelligence that rose briefly at the dawn of the digital age. We touched a little on this in our section on mythologisation. In the same way a story isn't just the events of the plot, worldbuilding isn't just the history and geography of your world. What messages are embedded in your fallen civilization's design and how do they interact with your story? It doesn't just have to come from how they fell, but the world they leave behind.

Susanna Clarke's *Piranesi* features one of the most visually striking worlds I've read about in a long time. The book opens with the following:

> First came the Tide from the Far Eastern Halls. This Tide ascended the Easternmost Staircase without violence. It had no color to speak of and its Waters were no more than ankle deep. It spread a grey mirror across the Pavement, the surface of which was marbled with streaks of milky Foam.
> Next came the Tide from the Western Halls. This Tide thundered up the Westernmost Staircase and hit the Eastern Wall with a great Clap, making all the Statues tremble. Its Foam was the white of old fishbones, and its churning depths were pewter. Within seconds its Waters were as high as the Waists of the First Tier of Statues.

Gigantic halls filled with statues, some as small as a person while others as tall as oak trees, and all the while these strange oceans washing through the corridors. We don't know what happened to the people who built this place, if it really exists at all, and the story never seeks to answer that. Instead, Clarke is perfectly content to place us in this world and use it to explore feelings of isolation, how we compartmentalise and memorialise the past, and our small space in the span of history. We are creatures lost in a world of statues, many much larger than us, forced to take paths this way or that by the tides, but building meaning out of what we can scrounge together.

'Two Robots at the End of the World' juxtaposes the beauty and wonder of human imagination and ingenuity with the brutal reality of how cruel we can be to each other. The towering skyscrapers reaching for the heavens paint a colourful world full of meaning and life, but it also shows the skulls buried underground—the decrepit ruins and broken lives left behind. I wanted to explore this tension between two ways of viewing the world we created in my worldbuilding. This isn't just character perspective, but a deliberate construction considering what to include, what to leave out, where to place these physical features, and how to frame them.

Tolkien's Middle Earth resounds with a distant echo of the bygone First Age, littered with the ruins of greater civilisations our characters all hark back to. Built into it is this growing distance from God as time goes on, as we take up technology and rely less on the natural world—or even destroy it. Valinor itself was removed from Arda after humanity sought war against it; we separate ourselves from God with our hubris.

Worlds can help us reflect on the past, present, and future. One day, when humanity is long gone, another civilisation may find us and our ruins and ponder who we were, what we meant. We feel safe in our ivory towers now, but ivory is fragile, and everything cracks under the weight of time.

Collapse is complicated

It's a lot easier to say Rome fell in 410CE when the Visigoths sacked Rome and Alaric crowned himself emperor. Arguably, it's even a lot more fun. This gives us a villain, a tragedy of Shakespearean proportions, and it doesn't force us to think about the implications for our society. There are no Visigoths waiting to sack us now. This idea is a lot easier than grappling with deflation, population collapse, disease management, and increasing elite mismanagement of the economy. It's also worth noting worldbuilding doesn't *need* to be realistic. It can be mythic and dramatic and Shakespearean because that can be fun—and that's okay.

However, if you *do* want to be more realistic, consider the following six factors:

- Depletion or loss of a vital resource: A loss of water, coal, oil, or some other fictional resource your civilisation depends on sociologically, militarily, or economically can lead to collapse.
- Insurmountable catastrophe: Extreme weather, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, or disease which the state infrastructure simply cannot manage can cause it to fracture.
- Insufficient responses to circumstances: Structural problems within the system like factional disputes, inflexible priorities, or lack of expertise can prevent a state from responding to a crisis appropriately and cause them to be destroyed.
- Elite infighting: If elites feel alienated from the circles of power, they may try to force change from outside the system rather than from within, contributing to collapse.
- Invasions: Another power destroys infrastructure, undermines the economy, or wipes out enough of the political structure to lead to a civilisational collapse.

- Class conflict: Inequalities and inequities can cause disruptions to production, politics, trade, and security, creating a social divide that eventually divides the state itself, often sparking revolution or secession.
- Economic factors: Deflation, debt, trade route disruption, over taxation, unemployment, or poor economic prospects can cause the social polity to disintegrate.

Virtually all of these played some role in the fall of the Mayans, the Old Kingdom of Egypt, the Roman Empire, the Han Dynasty, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the USSR. However, complex societies go through all these things all the time and are typically *more* equipped to deal with them than less complex societies. Collapse isn't just about the problems your civilisation faces, but why their problem-solving mechanisms don't work anymore.

While a civilisation may fall into civil war or face revolution, this isn't the same thing as civilisational collapse. Instead, the problem can be viewed as one of the diminishing returns of complexity. Increasing state complexity and civilisational collaboration eventually creates ineffective problem-solving systems and brings on economic stagnation. In reality, what happens is political entities—be it ethnic, religious, or regional—figure out that they're not getting much out of becoming more complex, more centralised, or more intertwined with other groups, and instead choose to split off and become independent, often knocking off a domino effect. This causes the state apparatus to collapse. In this sense, you can also interpret collapse through the lens of entities—be it elites or regional communities—losing faith that their problems can be solved or goals can be achieved *within* the system. Perhaps it is too slow, milquetoast, unresponsive, or even actively hostile.

You will also notice none of these civilisations *vanished* so dramatically, like the way we see in Asimov's or NK Jemisin's works. Instead, they fracture into dozens of polities which then reform or are reforged into new entities some time down the line. Civilisational collapse in the real world is much more about pieces of a complex jigsaw puzzle being repeatedly reconfigured. This creates fascinating stories of lineage, though, as every polity has its own history and association with all the powers that came before.

It's important not to understate just how critical elite mismanagement is as a cause. The elites might make society too dependent on a single resource because it's cheaper than diversifying, respond insufficiently to a crisis, alienate the populace with intense wealth inequality, create inefficient and factionalist bureaucracies, or mismanage the economy by, let's say, building a financial system based on subprime mortgages. A lot of these are boring, but they are realistic and can make for an interesting tapestry of issues in your world. Think about the ways your once great civilisation used to solve their problems and why those don't work anymore.

Iain M Banks' *Excession* is perhaps the best sci-fi book I've ever read. Almost all the books in this series are set inside an apex civilisation called the Culture, but *Excession* introduces something not even they understand. As the story unfolds, factions within the Culture disagree on how to handle this thing they call the 'Excession' and it's one of few times there's any real instability or mismanagement inside the Culture leadership. Being introduced to something they cannot understand nor control creates a fascinating exploration of how elite factionalism can create instability, even in a great power. On top of this, Banks offers what he calls the Outside Context Problem.

> An Outside Context Problem was the sort of thing most civilisations encountered just once… [Imagine] you were a tribe on a largish, fertile island; you'd tamed the land, invented the wheel or writing or whatever… you were in a position of near-absolute power and control… when suddenly this bristling lump of iron appears… and these guys carrying long funny-looking sticks come ashore and announce you've just been discovered, you're all subjects of the Emperor now, he's keen on presents called tax and these bright-eyed holy men would like a word with your priests.

When confronted with a problem outside anything a civilisation has had to deal with before, and perhaps even beyond their ability to truly comprehend, a state apparatus will begin to show its cracks.

The world of *Alien* makes us feel small and weak on a galactic scale. The world of *Horizon Zero Dawn* feels sombre and nostalgic, capturing a longing for the past. *Outer Wilds* speaks to how everything has its time, and

everything dies—even if sometimes life will be born anew afterwards. *2001: A Space Odyssey* juxtaposes the harrowing trials of existence with the aspirational future we might craft for ourselves. In all cases, these worlds echo our deeply held desires to be connected, to be more, to have hope, and to be part of something bigger. Maybe your story might just have some answers.

Summary

1. Deepen your worldbuilding by having different groups develop different cultural relationships with the fallen civilisation, such as admiration, revulsion, or affinity. This applies on an individual level, as well.
2. We mythologise the past all the time, especially when we don't quite understand it. Consider how the fallen civilisation fits into and fosters biases, narratives, legends, and myths.
3. If your story focuses on 'how it happened', consider how the revelation might emotionally impact your characters to help connect the worldbuilding to your story.
4. A fallen civilisation would have been built and developed under different rules and norms to the places that evolved after it. Think about how that level of tech, power, and coordination—as well as a different culture—affected where cities, trade routes, religious sites, and consequently ruins and relics might have been left. This is especially true given the environment itself can change over hundreds or even thousands of years.
5. Worldbuilding is thematic in the same way stories are. What do you want your fallen civilisation to say, and how can that be built into the narrative and themes of the story told within your world?
6. Real social collapse is complicated. It often involves the depletion or loss of a vital resource, insurmountable catastrophe, insufficient response to crises, invasions, elite infighting, class conflict, economic crisis, and elite mismanagement.
7. Societies become more centralised and complex to solve problems, but eventually there are diminishing returns. At this point, entities

within may find it more attractive to split off from the state, causing collapse.

[1] Though maybe when Volume XCIC releases it will be done.

[2] ‘Two Robots at the End of the World’ was published with Utopia Science Fiction Magazine in 2022 and was recently selected for their 5 Year ‘Best Of’ Anthology. You can read it, along with a host of other stories, in my collection *A Catalogue for the End of Humanity*.

[3] We have a whole chapter on subtext later in this book. Give that a read for more depth.

[4] ‘Ejaculated’ is an older term for exclaiming suddenly and briefly.

[5] It’s worth noting that exaggerated accents or ‘unrealistic’ dialogue is often intentional in some styles and genres. Quentin Tarantino is famous for his dialogue, but it’s far from much of what we’ve discussed in this chapter. His films are instead described as occupying a kind of ‘hyperreality’, and this bleeds into his dialogue. Likewise, satirical, comedic, or melodramatic writers often channel a very different style that might not be realistic but can be compelling with the right audience. Sometimes, we like to immerse ourselves in more over-the-top characters. Accents like Hagrid’s tend to play better in fiction aimed at younger children, but this is not universal.

[6] Of course, just because the author finds something interesting doesn’t mean their readers will.

[7] Likewise, other heroes can represent what an antihero might become if they get what they need.

[8] Gritty fatigue is where we get frustrated or even bored by the constant grimdark antiheroness causing problems for everyone with no reprieve. This can become an irritating plot tool, or at worst, a frustratingly one-dimensional obstacle.